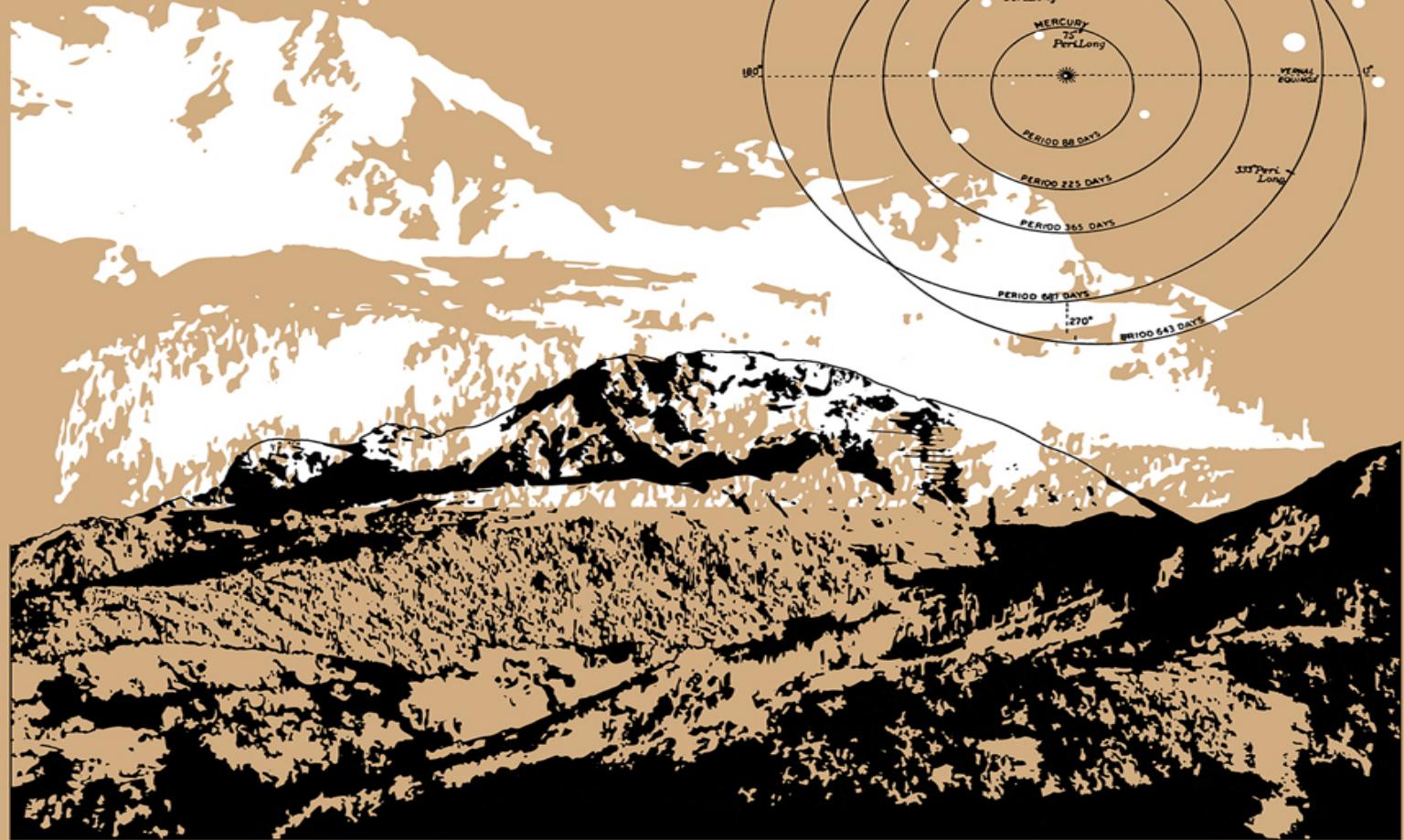




## TO THE WARM HORIZON

CHOI JIN-YOUNG

Translated by Soje



# *To the Warm Horizon*

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by 최진영 (Choi Jin-young)

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# *Prologue*

## *Ryu*

Have you heard of Korea?

Is Korea still where it used to be?

I was born in Korea. That's where I met Dan and gave birth to Haerim and Haemin.

That was a long time ago.

Haemin now lives in Warsaw. His wife recently gave birth to their fourth child. They told me they named her Lee Bona. They say Bona is as small as Haemin's head. I will never see that small, precious, precarious bundle of life. Much less hold her in my arms.

Haerim died when she was eleven years old. We abandoned Korea because she died. I abandoned explanation as we left Korea. Haemin was seven at the time. The age when children have a lot of questions. Haemin could not understand his parents' decision to leave his bicycle, his computer, and his older sister's room behind. I could not give him any explanation. I could not tell him, At least some of us have to survive.

I had happened to hear the midnight news in bed. It was a Monday. They said that a strange virus was spreading in a distant country, that the virus would mutate with every new vaccine. Tired as I was, I was mentally adding up our monthly expenses on birthdays, funerals, and weddings as the newscaster explained that there was no way of knowing what to look out for because the infection process was yet unknown. The next day, news of the virus took wind on every street. But it'll be fine soon. That was what we believed. Because the disaster is in a distant country. Because modern medicine and the government will protect us. Even as we heard about surging death tolls in the Americas, we worried about the cost of living, retirement, and our children's education in Korea. Then I received the call that Haerim was dead. She'd died less than an hour after being transported from her school to the hospital. Haerim had overslept that morning. After washing her face and tying her hair in a ponytail, she'd complained that her forehead was hot. She'd mumbled weakly that she wanted to eat a Bulgogi Whopper as she put on

her backpack. A soft whisper to herself as if chanting an old, bygone wish. I'd handed her a five thousand won bill and told her to buy one after school. Haerim had hugged me tight around my waist and rubbed her head on my chest. I'll get you medicine on my way home from work, I'd said. That was my last farewell.

The official death toll that day, in Korea alone, had been over a hundred thousand. It increased nearly fivefold the next day. We claimed Haerim's neglected body from the hospital and buried her in the hills behind our neighborhood. We dug into the earth without shedding a single tear. The parting had struck like lightning. We knew nothing of death. Only as we lowered the body into the pit and began covering it with dirt could I truly see: I was dumping Haerim into the ice-cold earth. Shrieking, I jumped into the pit and embraced her. I wanted to hold her in my arms and be buried alongside her. Haerim looked like she didn't even know she was dead. As she lay there on the frozen earth, it really seemed as if she was simply waiting for class to end so she could go eat that burger. I covered her with dirt, failing to leave her favorite burger by her side.

Mass bankruptcy brought on a disaster surpassing the disease: a rise in robberies, smuggling, human trafficking, murder, violence, and religious cults. The male mortality rate was much higher, and a baseless rumor began to circulate that the infected could be cured by eating the livers of young children. Governments dissolved; public order collapsed. Those were the days when we could neither stay nor leave.

Nevertheless, there were people who tried to stay. Those who believed that it would be the same wherever they went. Those who did not give up on whatever was left of their daily lives, memories without flesh or bone. Those who said if they must die, then they would die in their own homes. Like noble heroes, like warriors who laid down their weapons, they stood their ground. Meanwhile, I abandoned everyone except Dan and Haemin. My father and my older sister and their families. My old friends. Did they think they abandoned me, too? We had pledged that we would reunite somewhere someday, even if we had wronged each other and went our separate ways. That was our wide-eyed delusion.

When we arrived in Vladivostok, having abandoned everything and endured so much, I was thrown into confusion again: Where do we go now? Is there a place for us here? Yet the land was vast. We could keep going. We could roam to avoid the virus and the bandits running amok. To watch the sunset from somewhere other than where we'd watched it yesterday, and from somewhere else yet again tomorrow. To escape from the now as soon as possible. Our reason

for escape pierced through the solid earth and soared like the sun and shone brightly on us every day. All the people of that land believed in God. God's purpose, God's grace and blessings, God's gift bestowed from Heaven, God is looking after us, God is omniscient ... I believed in their God and feared Him. The natural landscape—outstretched menacingly yet senselessly as if to say, I have no use for you humans—made me fear Him.

And then there was Dori, who had glared at me as she held her little sister close in a small oratory near Ulan-Ude. I had shoved Haemin in Dori's arms and shut the doors on them. It was the first time I entrusted my child with someone on Russian soil. Dori embraced Haemin as she did her own sister and crouched down in a corner. After evading the bandits, I opened the doors to fetch Haemin. Dori was muttering to herself.

—God is rebuking us. The god of this land. He's telling us to leave here at once.

By the time we met again in Tomsk, Dori no longer feared God. She didn't believe in such things. Because she didn't believe in it, she didn't curse it either. I feared her new ways but wanted to believe in this new Dori.

I am now over seventy years old—no, eighty? I'm not sure. I have lived for too long. Relative to my years, the two months or so I spent in Russia would at most amount to a single sheep in a herd of a hundred. And yet that one sheep remains so vivid in my memory. Not a day goes by that I don't remember you all.

God no longer rebukes me. He is uninterested in me. I've survived for this long thanks to His indifference. If only I could've shared this loathsome life with my daughter.

Do you know Korea?

Is Korea still there?

There was a time when I'd wandered around Russia to flee the disaster that had shrouded the entire world. I'd been thirty-nine years old then.

*To the Warm Horizon*

## *Dori*

I think about only one thing: to never leave Joy behind on her own. So I must survive no matter what. I must do my part as someone who's still alive. This imperative is a *Da capo* without a *Fine*, a prayer I dedicate to myself. As Mom died, she asked Dad to look after us. As Dad died, he asked me to look after Joy. Like a secret key in some legend, Joy was handed down from Mom to Dad, from Dad to me. What could I ask of Joy in my dying moment? I love you. I will ask her to look after love. Joy, with my love handed down to her, will survive somehow. With love in her arms, she'll dash towards the end of the world.

Our parents reassured us by saying, It's fine. They said that humans were intelligent and persistent. That intelligent people would find a solution in no time, that we just had to sit and wait until then. What I thought was the exact opposite. That the world would most certainly be upended. That human determination would turn crisis into despair. That intelligent people would not find a solution but a bigger disaster. I had to find a different approach than my parents'. The day Dad died, I packed my bags right away. As light as possible. Only what I could carry on the run. I took Joy by the hand and headed straight to Incheon harbor. I wasn't sure if there'd be a ship running under such circumstances, but there was. The problem was that the tickets were unbelievably expensive. People who see opportunity in disaster, who don't starve or run even in disaster—they must belong to a world somewhere beyond the afterlife. To ride on the boat, I had to offer up as much gold and diamonds as they wanted. A gold ring wasn't even enough to cop a pack of gum. However, in exchange for taking my parents, God had given me the wondrous talent of stealing. I came to know something much better than ever before: what it was I needed. Where it was. Like a rat, I burrowed into the bedlam of screaming, brawling, milling people and stole two tickets. Tickets to Qingdao. Once there, I stole another pair of tickets. We traveled all the way to Ulan-Ude that way. What happened to the people I'd robbed? It wasn't just tickets or money but their lives I stole. I deserved their hatred.

I got caught in Ulan-Ude. Joy and I ran. She's a fast runner. So fast I can't keep up. But she can't run as quickly as she wants because she has to hold my hand the whole time. I'm the millstone around her neck. If it weren't for me, Joy would be able to reach the end of this continent without a car or a train, without getting tired. She can run and run until she flies like a bird. I tried to keep going as she dragged me forward but eventually had to let go of her hand. Joy stopped stockstill like a switched-off toy. The small angel looked back at me with a guileless expression. I'm the reason why Joy can't run. Dad's request had been misplaced. Instead of asking me to look after Joy, he should've told her to keep running even if her sister lets go of her hand. That my letting go is her cue to run faster.

Russia also had its share of crazy bastards gunning for children's livers. There even seemed to be a rumor going around that eating girls' livers was more effective than boys'. If only I were a magician. If only I could hide Joy away in my pocket like turning a handkerchief into a rose or making a pigeon disappear inside a top hat ... We had to avoid places with too many people, but places without people were also places without food. If I chose a mountain path, we might face some wild animal. We had to beware of long-starved dogs as well. Cities and villages occasionally appeared as we walked like cattle or horses along railroad tracks. The remaining villagers kept their guard up. They feared people on the road, and the people on the road feared them. A minor gesture or expression could lead to a misunderstanding that would inevitably end in someone's death. Whenever we reached an abandoned city, we scavenged for things to eat or wear. Whenever we were besieged by wind and snow on barren plains, I felt burdened by my body and resented my senses. God, who they say exists only in words and light, probably doesn't know hunger or frostbite. So He can't be omniscient, but that's how He can be immortal. If only we could understand each other, I thought. Because I wanted to ask someone, anyone: When does winter end on this land? Does spring arrive in Russia, too?

Last spring.

I was listening to a late-night radio show. Bundled up in a blanket, my hands wrapped around a warm mug of coffee. The rain suddenly began to pour just past two a.m. The thought of all the white flowers wilting made me feel a little mournful yet relieved. I turned down the radio to listen to the rain.

It was after my midterms. I had spent the night being disappointed in my lower-than-expected toeic scores, worrying if I would ever find a job in my desired field, tossing and turning in bed with a slight headache. When I woke up in the morning, the brilliant sunlight was quietly lapping away the rain from the previous

night. I had a dream. I wanted to host my own late-night radio show. I wanted to spend my dawns in a small studio.

Back then, death was far away as I faced a reality that was both precarious and dull. My parents had been paying off their loans for over a decade, I had my own loans to take care of, and Joy was lonely without any friends. Even in happy moments, I couldn't scrub away the melancholy that coated me like a second skin or blow away the fog that separated me from the world; I gave vague answers to anyone who asked me anything. But we had a heated floor that kept us warm and a roof that sheltered us from rain and snow. If I felt scared and repulsed by the world, I could close my bedroom door and hide under my desk and listen to music. Water and kimchi were in the fridge, rice in the rice cooker, and instant ramen in the cupboard. I could turn on the light. I could shower with warm water. I could buy and drink beer from the convenience store, where a barcode would ring up the set price. I could stand still on the side of a road and look at the passersby without hatred or fear. I could just look at them.

If nothing had happened, nothing would've happened.

We would've continued to not own the house we lived in. We would've started paying off another loan as soon as we were done with the first. We would've occasionally pushed death aside with the words, I'm so exhausted I could die. We would've whittled each of our own lives away, silently and ever so calmly.

—We're going to leave this place before spring gets here.

A woman, the one who shoved her son into my arms, said this to me while we were hiding in the oratory. The woman had a husband and a car. She didn't drive off right away, even after stashing her son in the backseat. It seemed like she was afraid to leave Joy and me behind on the road. Had I not been Korean and with Joy, the woman wouldn't have hesitated to leave. She certainly wouldn't have trusted me with her son. I'd happened to spot her car while walking; had there been no one inside, I would've stolen everything I could find. Even down to their last can of food.

We walked away first, even as the woman vacillated. Behind us, I heard the car door open and shut. The woman slowly backed up next to me. She lowered her window and told me to take anything we needed from the backseat. It was in return for keeping her son safe, she said. Blankets, clothes, water bottles, canned goods, and dry foods crowded the backseat. I accidentally made eye contact with the woman's husband while looking over those items. His eyes looked dim. Like he'd lost something important. Despite being with his wife and son, despite riding in a car loaded with food and water, the man was weary. I took two cans of tuna and stepped away from the car. Even then, the woman did not leave. I approached

the car again to grab two powdered soup packets and two cans of beans. She scooped out a handful of candy from a black bag and held it out to me. Only after I accepted the candy did the car drive away. Its wheels turned slowly at first, then accelerated soon enough.

I put these items in my backpack and a piece of hard candy in Joy's mouth. Her frayed shoes, the soles flapping from wear, caught my eye. Walking would become even more excruciating by night. I longed for a nice, long bath. Would it be better if it were summer? Then we could at least bathe in a lake. We could sleep without walls or ceilings. Hope might not lie in any continent that I must walk to reach, but in time instead. A bright, warm season that appears as the Earth revolves at its own pace around the sun. The only thing we can do as humans may be to live on and welcome that season. Winter will come again, I'm sure. Like time, hope is something that does not stay but comes and goes. Where were they going? Did they lose their family, too?

Joy glanced up at me and signed,  
—Where are those people going?  
—I don't know.  
—Where are *we* going?  
—We're ... looking for summer.  
—Where's summer?  
I pointed to the sun.  
—There, over the horizon. Where the sun sets.  
Rolling the candy in her mouth, Joy held my hand tight.

We reached a dreary and desolate village, empty except for the traces of people who had once lived there. I eyed an old house near the train tracks. No glass in the windows, the door off its hinges. It looked dark and deep inside. I threw several rocks through a window and waited for a while, but there was no sign of life. Rummaging around the area, I scraped together some things that looked flammable. As soon as we stepped into the house, I made a fire, opened up a can of food, and split it with Joy. Darkness fell quickly outside. Joy fell asleep with her body tightly curled up. I took out the sleeping bag and shook her awake. Barely conscious, she managed to crawl inside the sleeping bag.

Pulling a blanket over me, I thought about our shoes: If I had a car, I wouldn't have to worry about shoes. If not a car, a motorcycle. No. Even if I had something like that, gas would be a problem. I saw someone get shot while stealing gas. A bike then. Yes, I should find a bike ... But even if I find one, or a car with enough gas, where would I go? If I reached the end of the world, could I avoid death? Is it

really up to us to leave or stay? Where could I go to find hope? I tried to stick to the shoes, but my thoughts kept spinning out of control, leaving me depleted. The distant sound of a train got closer and closer, and a sharp pain shot through my body. If only I could get on a train. If only I could get inside that solid, hulking thing and get just a little farther away from this goddamn cold. The house shook slightly. Joy stirred in her sleep. We'll walk into the village once it gets darker out. We have to find shoes tonight. With that thought, I must've dozed off.

I opened my eyes. The fire had gone out. There was a babble of voices. Speaking Korean. It sounded like more than a couple of people. It still looked dark outside. I woke Joy up and took a peek. Two large box trucks were parked in the vegetable garden. I counted more than ten people. Several of them waved their flashlights into the house. I hid in the farthest corner of the room with Joy in my arms. People were busily lighting a fire and heating up their food. They made hot water from the snow and washed their hands and faces. The smell of grilled meat wafted in. I gagged and held Joy closer to my chest. So she wouldn't be able to smell anything. So she wouldn't see anything. With only a wall separating us, these people ate and drank and spoke in Korean. They called each other honey, you, sir.

—Jina. Jina.

A man spoke in a low but resounding voice.

—It's dangerous. Don't go off on your own.

This Jina didn't seem to heed the man. The man called after Jina several more times. Along with a flashlight beam, a small head suddenly popped through the window. A little later, I heard light, quick footsteps move towards the missing door. I hid Joy behind my back and took out my jackknife.

The flashlight beam that had suddenly appeared out of the black empty space shined on me.

—Jina, get back here. Don't wander off like that. I'm telling you, it's dangerous. The person at the window lowered their flashlight, then leaned outside.

—Fine! I'm coming, I'm coming.

With this, Jina turned away from the window and looked at me without a word. I held the jackknife up to my chest. She did not come any closer. She laid down the flashlight, pointing the light toward herself. With her face and body totally bundled up in bulky winter clothes, I could only make out a pair of eyes and a nose under a hat. After staring at me intently, Jina suddenly took off her knit hat and revealed more of herself. Her hair was a dark blood-red. I recoiled in surprise. Joy squirmed and stuck her head out from behind me.

—Oh.

Jina broke the silence.

—I see there's a little kid, too.

She drew a little closer.

—Is she your little sister?

She asked without hesitation, as if chatting with a friend.

—Not your daughter, obviously . . .

She murmured as if thinking out loud, combing through her disheveled hair with her fingers.

—Is it just you and the kiddo?

Jina did not put up a guard with me.

—You're from Korea, right?

I, on the other hand, did not let my guard down. Jina scratched her cheek, looking at me as I said nothing in response.

—A-im peurom Koria.

Out of the blue, she spoke English.

—Wheo al yu peurom?

I sensed a slight Gyeongsang dialect.

—Naiseu tu mit yu.

She took another step toward me and extended her hand.

—If it's not that either . . . *Hajimemashite*.

Greeting me in Japanese, Jina quietly gazed at me for a moment, fixed her hat, and switched back to Korean.

—Don't worry. We're not bad people. No one's infected, and we don't eat kid liver. We're going to spend the night right outside and leave in the morning . . . But still, I won't tell anyone that I saw you here.

With a faint smile, Jina slowly backed away and out of sight. The light faded, and the air fell dark again. I felt like I had dreamed with my eyes open. My heart was pounding hard. Not because I was afraid . . . No, I was afraid. No, it wasn't that I was afraid . . . I was afraid.

Joy signed,

—Are we leaving now?

I nodded, then shook my head. I signed back,

—Let's stay here tonight.

Seated upright, I kept dozing off. Between my catnaps, the view outside the window gradually deepened into black-blue. I ended up lying on my side. My

consciousness poured into a dark pit as if I were plunging into hell. Even in my sleep, I remembered Jina's English and chuckled. My laugh surprised me, and I woke up. A campfire was blazing. I sat up. Jina held out a small cup.

—Coffee.

She placed the cup in my hand. Wondering if this was a dream, I stared at the pure white steam blooming and rising from the black liquid. As I held the cup, Jina wrapped her hand around mine, tipping the cup to try the first sip herself. Then, without letting go of my hand, she tipped the cup to my lips. My lips were gently wetted by the black liquid. It was real coffee. Real. Coffee. I sipped it sweetly. The warmth spread inside me, startling awake every cell in my body. I continued taking little sips without taking my lips off the cup.

—Your shoes are a mess.

Jina muttered, patting my shoes. Her hair was blood-red last night. I was thinking about how much I wanted to take off that knit hat to see if I'd dreamed it all up—just thinking about it—when my hand tugged at her hat, exposing her red hair.

—Agh ... My hair's probably super gross and oily and matted down ...

She muttered again as she ran her fingers through her hair, but she did not show any sign of embarrassment.

—You're also from Korea, right?

She warmed her hands by the fire.

—What should I call you?

I was flustered.

—You can call me Jina.

Jina came into focus, right before my eyes. Hers were the color of ash. She rubbed her nose.

—By the way, where're you going? Have you decided?

My eyes could not lie, and Jina kept trying to meet them. I lowered my head and drank the coffee. Jina laid her hand on mine and pressed down a little. It felt like she was saying, Lift up your head and look at me. So I looked up.

—Do you want to come with me?

Jina, with those gray eyes and that red hair.

—Come with me.

I knew. What it was I needed. Where it was.

## *Jina*

The early risers were filling the open air with their voices and clatter. I stood outside the window and waved Dori over. She held Joy's hand and walked up next to me. I pointed to each person, explaining who was who. Then I locked eyes with Dad. He remained unperturbed even when he saw Dori. My dad was a hard man to surprise. In Korea, my extended family had all lived together in the same neighborhood. There used to be more than fifty of us altogether. Of that fifty, we lost at least thirty in a matter of two days. Even then, Dad did not panic. My aunt who lost her parents and her children hanged herself. My uncle who lost his wife and his children jumped from his apartment building. My dad, who lost his parents, his wife, and his siblings, declared with a terrifying expression that he would not let anyone else die. He started accepting gold and diamonds left and right, selling off all the cars from his used foreign car dealership. Except for two big, sturdy box trucks. He crammed our living relatives into those trucks along with a load of necessities, and we made our escape from Korea.

People used to tell me that I take after my dad. Hearing this repeatedly as a kid, I really thought I was like him. Now I see it differently. It's not that I actually resemble my dad; it's just that I grew up hearing that I'm a lot like him. Which, in turn, made me resemble my dad.

I said I wanted to take Dori and Joy with us. Dad didn't think long about it.

—This is the last time.

That was his answer.

—You can't take anyone else now.

He said with emphasis.

—You'll have to pay somehow for the ride.

He was looking directly at Dori.

—If you're carrying a gun, hand it over now.

Without a word, Dori opened up her knapsack and let my dad ruffle through it. He then patted her and Joy down. When Dad found a jackknife in Dori's pocket, he burst into laughter.

—What can you even do with something like this?

He didn't wipe the patronizing smirk off his face as he mimed opening a can with her jackknife. But when Dori said she'd escaped Korea and traveled on foot from Ulan-Ude with Joy, he was briefly at a loss for words.

—Without anyone's help?

Dad eyed Dori's blank expression.

—Without killing anyone?

Dori didn't answer. Joy, despite the scared look on her face, smiled a little when she made eye contact with me.

—How long did it take?

—I didn't count the days.

He paused for a bit.

—Sure.

Dad put her jackknife in his pocket. Dori asked him to give it back.

—It's too dangerous for you to carry.

—The itty-bitty thing that can barely open a can?

—Doesn't matter. No.

—Please give it back.

—I'll give it back to you when I can trust you.

—There's no need for that. Please give it back now.

—What do you mean?

—I'm saying, it's fine if you don't trust me. Because I won't be trusting you, either.

Dad fiddled with the jackknife and stared at Dori for a while. She did not avert her gaze.

—I suppose that's better than asking me to just trust you.

He returned the jackknife to Dori.

—You cannot disobey my orders from now on. If you do, I'll have no choice but to kick you out. And it's best that you don't expect us to treat you like family.

Several of my relatives aired their grievances when they heard Dad's decision to take Dori and Joy with us. Reproach about picking up strays off the side of the road. Complaints about not having enough food to go around. Suspicion about their identities, about their stealing from us. Concern about getting attacked for having a little girl with us. But no one could oppose his decision.

I locked eyes with Gunji, who was leaning against a truck tire, combing his hair over his forehead, making a serious face. He was the only one among us who

wasn't family. Gunji, too, came to ride in our truck because of me. We'd been neighbors for over a decade. He spent more time at my house than his own. He was often beaten up, both at home and at school. My mom even went to the school and fought with his teacher. She paid a visit to each of the parents whose children hit Gunji and argued with them one by one. But she could not fight his dad. Such an effort could have led to her death.

After Gunji's mom became sick and died, his dad drunkenly tried to kill Gunji and himself. Gunji hid in our shed and refused to come out, even after his dad died. I wasn't able to look after Gunji, who'd starved for several days in the dark shed. Recalling those days ... time collapses on itself. I can't recall the events in order ... no, there's no order. Everything happened at once. Gunji's dad and my mom and my relatives and our neighbors all died in an instant. The sun came up even when I didn't sleep. I couldn't breathe, but I did not die. I was in a state of consciousness where I couldn't distinguish whether the things I was seeing and hearing were nightmares or reality. Looking at a burning building, I wondered if it was something I'd done. Looking at the people who'd died, I trembled with fear, unsure if I'd killed them. The world spun on in a macabre dance. A distorted melody sounded from every direction. Though I did not speak, a spell of curses leaked out on their own. Though I did not cry, tears flowed down my cheeks. When I got on the truck to leave, I met eyes with Gunji who'd been quietly watching us from behind the shed door. Only then did I realize that he was still alive. I sprinted over and grabbed him by the hand. Gunji held onto the door and refused to come out. Even when I pulled so hard that I nearly fell backward in that high-stakes game of tug-of-war, he wouldn't budge one bit. Dad jumped out of his truck, threw me over one shoulder, and tossed me into the cargo hold. Shrieking at the top of my lungs, I ran back to Gunji. If they wanted to take me with them, they had no choice but to take him along. My family did not take to Gunji, who wasn't family to them. But Gunji kept his head up. He grew much more assertive than he'd ever been in Korea.

The other day, Gunji talked to me with a dazed look on his face.

—Hey, sis. I just remembered this time I was watching soccer on the salon's TV, a game against Qatar or something. Anyway, some old man getting a haircut was watching it too and got all riled up and started cursing. Then he said, Ah, they're so crap, it's like they're playing with their feet!

I waited for him to continue.

—He was mad that they were playing *soccer* with their *feet*.

Gunji said again, this time with emphasis. Only then did I understand and burst into laughter.

—So the lady was like, They run around and kick the ball with their feet. What are they going to do, run their mouths like somebody over here?

I could picture the whole scene so well that I giggled for a while, then stifled myself mid-laugh. I felt the older folks' icy stares.

We who'd lost family and become refugees could not laugh.

We'd left our jokes and laughter behind in our hometown.

The older folks did not speak unless it was absolutely necessary. To them, words were like a bucket used to draw from a well of emotions. The longer they talked, the more biting criticism and resentment splashed past the brim. And though they never raised their voices or spat out horrible insults at each other, conversations would chill to a halt. Self-recrimination and guilt—the belief that it was a sin to have survived and a further sin to continue evading death, that we were all wicked humans—had struck deep into their dim eyes and speech. I knew. That our misfortune made us like this. That we were pinned down by death. That we could not be free from memory, that we were too exhausted to look out into the future. For those reasons, I really didn't want to resemble misfortune. I didn't want to despise life. I didn't fully understand life and death yet, but at the very least, I didn't want to think of either as some kind of fluke or punishment. Because if I did, I could cope with neither Mom's death nor my life.

—I might be wrong to think this way, but . . .

One night, Gunji talked to me as if he'd entered a confession booth. He said that there were times when he actually felt relieved to live in the present, where he didn't have to go to school and his dad was gone and everyone was equally unfortunate. That now he didn't think about wanting to die, at least. That he felt confident about not getting beaten up by anyone if he were to return to Korea and attend school again but didn't want that sort of *what if* to materialize.

—So you don't want to go back to Korea?

—There's nothing good there anymore. Your mom's not there, either.

—Do you have somewhere else you want to go, then?

—I've been thinking about that this whole time, and . . . Gunji was thinking about the future. The same kid who used to have a habit of repeating, It's better for scum like me to just drop dead.

— . . . an ocean that's warm year-round would be nice.

Gunji said even if it takes a long, long time, he would keep moving forward and never give up until he reached a place like that. He said he'd build a house by the beach and swim in the ocean. He'd catch fish and pick sweet, tangy berries and

give them to someone he loves. Gunji had a dream. This dream, that he'd never had in Korea, he developed after the disaster.

—Do you want to go back to Korea?

I assumed I'd end up going back to Korea once everything settled down. How could I have ever thought that? What was in Korea? There was nothing there. Just as there's nothing here.

No. Here, we had family. We had an endless road before us, a tomorrow we can't predict. Back in Korea, I wanted to become a fashion designer, but a dream like that is useless now. *A warm ocean where I can build a house and swim around and catch fish and ...* I should dream such dreams. Because an ocean that's warm year-round must exist somewhere, even if fashion designers no longer do. Because no matter how much time passes and whether or not humans go extinct, the ocean will always remain.

—Or do you wanna come with me?

His eyes shone with determination, something I'd never seen in him before. To dream. To share that dream. For Gunji, a dream was a shiny new thing he'd never touched before, something like first love that could simply be embraced without calculation because he'd never experienced it. I tried imagining a warm ocean in a world of ruins. Like the silence that lingers after a long symphony, the image grew empty and forlorn somehow.

I tried to give Dori my shoes, but she wouldn't take them. She turned away even when I gave her some food I'd saved for her. Dori didn't touch anything belonging to the truck. She always sat on the outermost edge where at any moment she could open the door and jump out. All the while, she stayed in her corner as if she couldn't see or hear, like a bundle of blankets. To this one of my aunts commented, At least she knows her place. My aunt-in-law was less forgiving, saying, That girl is too cold-hearted. When an adult asks her something, she should at least say something in response. Even as the older folks exchanged such words, Dori never revoked her silence or her blank expression. She sat still like a doll and even breathed silently, only appearing human when she looked at Joy. I in turn became a doll as well. I sat across from them and watched Dori all day.

Every part of Dori—her eyes, nose, lips, ears—was slender and long. Her slim, petite body looked like a sapling one would plant on Arbor Day. If we grew a little closer over time, I wanted to comb the tangle of hair coming down from her knit hat. I wanted to comb it and put it in a nice braid or cut it to her shoulders. I wanted to tell her, You're really cute. How old was she? Where had she lived?

What had she done for a living? What had happened to her parents? How had life been for her in Korea? Though I was curious, I didn't ask her about anything. I simply gazed at her. Carrying out imaginary conversations with her inside the bumpy truck, I thought it was fine to not know. I didn't know Dori's wounds, and Dori didn't know mine—perhaps that's why we could see each other as we were in the moment. We could even write a new story of our own.

After speeding down a two-lane expressway all day, we drove into a city in ruins. Like all the places we'd passed through so far, it was shrouded in snow and darkness. I occasionally spotted some people but couldn't tell if they were locals who lived there or drifters stopping by. The streets were bleak and dirty, and every store bore traces of having been looted. We decided to repair the truck and spend the night there.

Even when my family gathered for dinner, Dori and Joy sat far away from us as they ate bits of canned food and drank bottled water from their bags. And then they vanished. I worried that they'd maybe left for good, but they returned before dark. Dori was wearing shoes that weren't entirely new but didn't have holes in them. Joy's shoes were different, too. Dori made a small fire using the building near our truck as a windbreak and laid out their sleeping bags. Watching her do this, I got angry. Especially because I was so wound up after spending the whole day fretting over Dori: where she was and what she was eating and how she was feeling.

—Go sleep in the truck instead. If you're uncomfortable around the older folks, you can just stick by me, you know. Dori tucked a blanket over Joy and checked on the fire.

—I'm telling you, even if something bad were to happen, it's safest by my side.  
Dori shook her head and muttered,

—There's nowhere safe.

—Yeah. So let's stick together.

—I'm fine out here.

—But *I'm* not fine with that.

—Don't worry about me.

—How could I not worry about you? I'm the one who put you in this truck.

—... I really do appreciate that.

Dori spoke very slowly.

—I'm being careful for a reason. Everyone's lost their family. They probably don't like me showing up out of the blue and acting like I'm part of the family.

*Why did my kid die, and why is that kid alive. Why is that kid eating the food that my kid should've eaten.* That's how they look at me ...

—Fine. Suit yourself.

Because I couldn't tell Dori she had it all wrong, because I couldn't hate her for saying what she said, because I couldn't argue any longer, I was about to turn around when Dori grabbed my hand and promptly let it go. A small box was in my hand, like magic. I opened the box. Lipstick. Glossy and rose-scented.

—Where did you get this?

I murmured, unable to take my eyes off the tube. Dori gestured to my hair.

—I thought it'd go well together.

I put it on immediately. My lips being dry and chapped, I couldn't apply the product as smoothly as I had in the past, but I felt better just smelling the sweet rose scent right under my nose. Dori cleaned up my lip line with her finger. I tried to put it on her as well, but she dodged and refused. Elated, I jumped around Dori like a filly, then brought over my sleeping bag and blanket from the truck.

—Didn't you say you didn't want to sleep in the truck? I can sleep here, then.

—Your dad won't like that.

—Doesn't matter.

—If your dad doesn't like me, then I can't ride in his truck.

—Come lie down.

Dori didn't listen to me, and I didn't listen to Dori either. I clutched the lipstick, laid on my side, and looked at her. The moment Dori gave it to me, I realized how much I'd been wanting it. On this desolate, frozen expanse of land—on this endless, endless road—amid these people weary from misfortune and despair, I'd been wanting exactly this sort of thing. Not something that was meant to be eaten or worn, but something that made me more myself. Something that I couldn't do without, like jokes and laughter, despite the looks I'd get from everyone else. Suddenly I was filled with regret. When we left Korea, I'd grabbed only a few photos of Mom as keepsakes, but really I should've held onto things like this lipstick. Mom's makeup, Mom's scarves, Mom's pajamas, items that bore Mom's scent and trace.

Mom's hair salon had been my personal playground. I played around with the brushes, wigs, and makeup there from a very young age. It always smelled nice in the salon. The yogurt in the fridge and the coffee mix never ran out, and there was always some snack, like pastries or rice crackers or boiled sweet potatoes, set on the old table in front of the sofa. Mom didn't have to prepare the food herself because the neighborhood ladies always brought stuff over. They'd bring food to

share, chat for hours and hours, then abruptly file out of the salon saying, Oh, look at the time. The regulars were like sparrows, delivering all sorts of fun stories in their beaks.

The summer I turned fifteen, I completely burned off the ends of my hair while playing with the straighteners on my own. That was when Mom cut my hair short. I was very pleased with myself in the mirror. Mom had already done the shaping, so all I had to do was trim it once in a while. It was very easy. I just had to cut it with the salon scissors, like weeds. Once I even cut Gunji's hair. He erupted like a volcano when I finished. I insisted how cool and unique his new hairstyle was, and after some persuading he calmed down. But the next day, when he returned from school, he was livid again. I also learned how to apply makeup from my mom. She was good at finding colors that complemented my skin tone. Mom was someone who loved beautiful things, was beautiful herself, and knew how to find beauty. Because I was a girl, Grandfather had left it up to Mom and Dad to choose a name for me. Mom named me in a heartbeat. I love my name because it was the first present that my mom ever gave me. Even when I got into a fight with my friends, my annoyance would subside as soon as they called my name. I'd think, How important can this petty grudge possibly be?

—Jina.

Dori called my name, caressing my cheeks.

—Please, I'm asking you. Go sleep in the truck.

I shook my head, still laden with sleep.

—We have to stay together. That's the only way we can be safe.

I don't know if I said that before I fell asleep or while dreaming. I'm not even sure if it's something I said or something Dori said. When I opened my eyes in the morning, those words alone had stayed with me. Like a tattoo across my heart, of a maxim that only I could recognize.

## *Dori*

The road continued.

The snow shrouding the earth hardened into ice as if to taunt the clear skies and blinding sunlight.

We couldn't get any news on the road. Of how much the virus had spread, how many people were left, how many cities had been destroyed across the world. The cold and devastation before us seemed to be our only reality and thus the entirety of this world. Those who left ahead of us grew farther and farther away. No one ever came back.

Joy and I had to make up our minds in advance.

How long will we continue to travel with these people?

I didn't want to foolishly open up to them and grow weak. To agonize over the dead every time I felt warmth in my heart. When I left Korea, I told myself I would only keep Joy by my side. So that I wouldn't break down, no matter who died from now on. So that I wouldn't die with resentment in my heart.

Every morning, Joy asked me,

—When are we leaving?

I extended my thumbs and pointer fingers, shaking them up and down twice. Joy nodded her head as though she understood my resolve.

Jina's father paid more attention to the amount of gas left than the food. He stacked ten barrels on each of the two box trucks and did everything he could to fill these barrels at every opportunity. Though gas stations were usually empty, we'd occasionally find one with gas. Those places were occupied by rough, unsavory people. To get gas from them, we had to give them as many diamonds and as much gold as they wanted. Some even demanded young women. Whenever Jina's father would stop the truck on the side of the road, I placed a blanket over Joy and clutched the jackknife inside my pocket. Jina always got out of the car first and told us what was going on outside. Though on multiple

occasions she said, Don't worry, we'll never sell you two, it was better to forget such promises the moment one heard them.

Crime spread like the virus. It had been like this in Korea, too. At first everyone was mainly concerned about getting sick. They thought that if they avoided going outside and kept their distance from other people, if they just stayed at home, they'd be safe. As time went on, more people died from violence and arson. A strange new religion that promoted murder as a form of repentance became popular. As Mom lay dying, Dad, Joy, and I were able to hold her cold hands and cry over her together. As Dad lay dying, Joy and I had to hide in the boiler room and hold our breaths. The robbers who had crashed into our house like a tank slashed Dad's body and looted everything that looked remotely useful. When Joy and I crawled out and held his hand, Dad was still alive although his body was soaked in blood. He stopped breathing only after seeing that we hadn't died.

Though I had certainly experienced it, it didn't feel like the past. It felt like the future. A sensation I'd perpetually experience in days to come.

It snowed heavily for three days. We stayed at a bleak village near the frozen river, waiting for the snow to stop. It was a small village with fewer than thirty houses. There was no one around, and the houses were all empty. Many had been either torched or raided. After we looked around for a decent place to rest, Jina and I stepped into a house with a stable. Scanning the interior, she muttered,

—They must've kept horses here.

She kicked a frozen lump of dirt tangled in the hay.

—Looks like horse poop.

—How do you know that?

—We had a neighbor who raised horses.

It sounded like a fairytale. I imagined Jina horseback riding through a field.

—No, I never got to ride one myself. But I often went to see them because they were so pretty.

—Because they were pretty?

—Yeah, their eyes were like black pearls. And their manes were like silk. I've never seen black pearls in real life, but actual jewels couldn't be prettier than those horses' eyes. Cows are really pretty, too. I'd be mesmerized looking into their eyes and lose track of time. Sometimes their owner would let me touch them, and in the winter they were so warm that I wanted to climb on one's back and hug it and feel its warmth against my stomach.

—Did you live in a fancy neighborhood?

—It was the country. You know, the usual countryside with cows and pigs and chickens.

The only animals I'd seen as a kid were dogs, cats, goldfish, sparrows, and pigeons. I gave it some thought, but that was really it. As for cows and pigs and chickens ... I only saw them in pictures and videos or in meat display cases. So I'd never thought of them as being pretty or warm. I remembered reading in a book once that nomads use horse dung as fuel. I asked Jina if her family also used horse dung for their fires. She laughed.

It stopped snowing, so we were on the move again. Every now and then, when the box truck stopped and I opened the door to look outside, I saw that the road was endless and the plains colorless. Because I saw the same landscape every time, it felt like we hadn't moved at all. I couldn't find the sun even when I looked up at the sky, and so it was difficult to sense which way was which. When I held Jina's hand, resting our bodies against each other inside the cargo hold adorned with yellow fairy lights—when I concentrated on the sound of her breath and the small vibrations throughout my body—my sense of reality vanished, my past was expunged. Only the moment existed.

I asked Jina where we were ultimately headed.

—I don't know. One moment they say Finland, the next Turkey, and sometimes they even say it's Moscow. It keeps changing. They say we have to keep moving anyway.

Which meant that there was no set destination. As much as he tried not to let it show, Jina's father seemed to hesitate at every turn whether to continue west in search of a city or drive north towards Siberia. The farther west we went, the more likely we were to run into bandits and the virus; farther north, it would be harder to endure the cold.

—I disagree. It doesn't matter how far we go. The whole world's like this.

—The whole world?

—Yeah. I see it every night in my dreams.

I looked intently into Jina's ash-colored eyes. Was she saying she had prophetic dreams?

—It's a joke, you dummy. You don't believe any of the things I tell you to believe, and yet you take all my jokes seriously.

I thought Jina, of all people, might very well have precognitive dreams.

—You're looking at me so earnestly that I can't even crack a joke.

She wrapped my cheeks in her hands, pretending to coddle me.

—Here's what I think. They said there isn't a continent where the virus hasn't spread to. That was the last news report I heard. There may really be a bunker somewhere, like people've said. I'm sure *someone*'s inside. If there're bunkers in Europe, there must be some in Russia, which means there's no way there aren't any in Korea. But why did we come all the way over here, then? How are we going to get into a bunker in Europe when we couldn't even find one in Korea? To fire guns or whatever with our lives on the line, just so we can get to a place like *that*, is a bit ... Dad's probably keeping us on the move because things are volatile and dangerous right this second. He needs hope to keep moving, and that's why he believes there must be a refugee shelter beyond the border.

Why did I leave Korea? Everyone I loved had all died. The people who used to say the same things and lead similar lives had turned on each other ... Joy's liver was far more valuable than a handful of diamonds. I had to keep her safe. There were too many people, too many corpses. I couldn't bear it. It was much more horrific to suffer in a hell that was familiar. I was seized by the idea of fleeing to a place I could reach on foot without recourse to a plane or ship.

—I won't chase after some rumored bunker. Or put things off any longer.

I repeated Jina's words silently to myself.

—I'd like to start here and now.

Start here and now ... Start what?

—A new life.

A new ... How?

As I asked myself these questions, an answer of my own seemed to emerge faintly from the fog of my mind. It was like blowing away the dust to uncover a forgotten pattern. I was amazed. It was my first good idea in a while. A resolution as far-fetched as it was good.

At the entrance of another village in ruins, we encountered a gang of vagabonds, emaciated and starved like zombies. Jina's father shot two dead. The others slowly backed away, glaring at us. Their eyes were wide open, as if hell-bent on remembering every one of us inside the truck. My heart had been briefly lit up by Jina's wish to start here and now, but a shadow fell over me again. A dark state of mind both comfortable and familiar.

People were outnumbered by revolvers and shotguns. Only men, except Gunji, could carry. Only men could drive or ride in the front passenger's seat. Jina's father managed the supply of necessities ever so fastidiously. We needed his permission to open even a can of food. The binoculars, the maps, everything was with him. He never slept in the cargo hold with the rest of the family, taking the

driver's seat instead with a gun on his chest. He seemed to know that Jina was sleeping outside with me. I didn't know if he warned her when I wasn't around, but he never said anything to me. Still, I remembered what he'd said to me the day we boarded the truck. That I'd have to pay somehow.

Jina wore the lipstick every day. And she was always by my side. We slept together, and we ate together. We scavenged through cities together. What I used to never even glance at, things which were completely useless in these times, which were easy to procure *because* they were useless—things like makeup or a hairpin or a scarf, which made Jina happier above all else—became just as important as canned food and matches. I never walked past those things anymore. I started thinking about whether something would look good on Jina or if it was something she would like. Gunji, who used to only care about combing his hair in the side mirror whenever the truck stopped, gradually became one of us. Every time we went scavenging or cooked a can of food over the fire, Gunji would delight in it like a kid at summer camp. Joy looked up to Gunji. She was sometimes shy, sometimes jealous, sometimes sulky. Perhaps she'd fallen in love.

Jina set her own silverware, washed it with snow from the plains, and dried it clean after every meal. She shook out and folded the blankets every day and always combed her hair before putting on her knit hat. She never shoveled or poured food into her mouth, never eating straight from the can. She plated it neatly and sat properly as she chewed and swallowed slowly. She heated up and cooled off her food before eating. She put beans in a bowl and ate them one by one as if to confirm, Ah, this must be a bean. Even as she bit into a single baked potato with her back turned to the wind, Jina's meals reminded me of a leisurely weekend supper. She was born with such nonchalance. A peculiar nonchalance. The ability to retain her dignity even in the pits of hell. She may have been more distressed for that reason—if she couldn't keep these routines, she'd be better off dying a hundred times over. Meanwhile, I rushed myself. I hid in the corner to not let anyone else see me eat. If I could not heat something up, I just ate it cold. To eat as quickly as possible and not leave a trace. To erase hunger momentarily. That was the only reason why I ever ate.

Jina had hit upon another reason.

—I might have to live like this for the rest of my life. This might be my last meal, I don't know. So I want to enjoy it properly, even if it's just a potato. If every day is precious, and if every meal is precious, I want to treat precious things preciously.

That might have been Jina's hope. Hope beyond that of crossing the border or finding a bunker. To live well in the now instead of recalling the past and being miserable or anticipating things getting better and forcing hope on herself.

—What misfortune wants is for me to mistreat myself. To look down on myself and destroy myself. I'll never come to resemble this disaster. I won't live as the disaster wants me to live.

I wanted to resemble Jina.

I tried to eat and drink and walk like her. I tried not to rush myself, to see and feel and think slowly about what was in front of me. But I wasn't Jina. Jina was unique. We were different. Though I could mimic the way she plated her beans before eating them, I could not copy her mind. I was gradually coming to resemble the disaster. I feared that Jina would notice.

Yes, I had to assume that everything had taken a turn for the worse. The absolute worst? That would be a world without Joy. But that hadn't happened. The biggest misfortune was always a step away from me, and all I could do was to keep a constant eye on it. Sometimes I'd think hard to myself, Why *am* I keeping an eye on it? It's like chanting a spell that summons misfortune, like I'm trying to get used to it or something. But it was all too near, despite my attempts not to look. Every day I saw corpses and ruins. What was as frightening as the thought that I'd one day become part of this hellscape was the hunch that I may live on, having to see such things for the rest of my life. I was scared that I'd grow indifferent and scared that I wouldn't. Though surviving day after day was, in fact, miraculous, I didn't think miracles existed anywhere. There were no miracles. If miracles really did exist, they'd missed their chance to appear. Too many people had died already. Let's say that a few survive in the end. Could they call that a miracle?

But Jina kept ... doing things. She made me think differently. She showed me that I could laugh and be happy, even in a situation like this. If someone gave me a tube of lipstick, could I react as happily as Jina did? If not lipstick, what could make me that happy? I couldn't think of anything. Even if my parents were to come back to life right this minute, I wouldn't be able to smile. Or cry. Even if they held my hands and called my name, I'd deny it all, calling it an illusion. Why wouldn't it be? What I found precious, what I loved, what I must cherish and keep safe, what I missed—I feared all of those things. Having Joy was enough. Yet I always looked for Jina. Then, when our eyes met, I'd look away. Even as I secretly imitated her way of speaking and remembered her laugh in the dead of night, I insisted that I couldn't get close to Jina. Like a painkiller, she made me forget about reality. I often forgot about Joy when I was with Jina. I accidentally let go of

Joy's hand on several occasions and only turned around after the fact. Whenever that happened, I disliked Jina for no good reason. I disliked myself for disliking her. Dislike! On the road, there's no reason to dislike someone. You only need to hate or fear. I was like that before I developed another emotion. Jina gazed at me with such clear eyes when I called her name. Whenever I saw her eyes, I wondered about mine. How do I look at you? What kind of look could it be that makes you see me and smile?

—Jina.

Jina turned to me. I held out a card I had picked up in the last village. A small card with a red Christmas tree illustration. Inside, there was a short message in Russian that I couldn't decipher. When I spotted that card in a scattered pile of trash, I'd been shaken. I'd felt nauseated, like I was carsick. I recalled the greetings I used to exchange during the spirited holiday season ... All those sleepless nights I spent flipping through the diary pages I filled that year. One year, I wandered around a stationery store to buy myself a new diary. Surrounded by fairy lights and carols. Hearing countless calls of Merry Christmas! and Happy New Year! as I walked down the street alone. I rolled those phrases around in my mouth. What was the date today? Has the new year already begun? There's no longer any meaning in such things. We were walking in the heart of winter. Here, no one ages and time does not pass in increments of days and years. I wouldn't be surprised even if spring were to arrive and suddenly slide into summer, if I were to look at a clear lake and see an old hag in my reflection. Looking at the handwritten Russian on the card, I recalled the Merry Christmases and Happy New Years I had to now forget. Jina wouldn't be like this. She'd spend precious days preciously.

Jina laughed as Jina did and accepted the card.

I'd like to laugh like Jina, I thought when I found myself kissing her. It was cold and warm. Rough and soft. Frostbite and hunger and misfortune and disaster all bolted away, surprised by our kiss.

My lips, too, smelled of roses.

We followed the river to a small village. Like all the other villages we'd seen thus far, every vegetable garden had a small house stuck to it like a growth. There were vacant houses and houses with people living inside. The villagers were wearing clean clothes. They looked healthy. They kept an appropriate distance from us but didn't try to drive us out. They seemed to wish that we would quietly pass through. We decided to park the trucks in a vegetable garden at the edge of the village and rest for a night. Water trickled out when we turned the tap. Jina said she was happy to sleep in a place worthy of being called a house for the first time in a long while. The others didn't want to sleep indoors. They kept their

guards up, saying the villagers could turn at any moment and rob us. The men did not let go of their guns, even as they started a fire and heated up food.

As soon as we stepped into the house, Jina held her knapsack upside down and shook its contents out. All sorts of junk poured out like scampering children. The things that Jina had brought from Korea and the things we scavenged from the road were all tangled up together, forming a modest mound. I was startled to see a thin book alongside a pair of earphones. They felt like inventions from the future. I couldn't believe she'd thought to pack a book and earphones in an emergency.

Seeing those earphones, I wanted to listen to music.

Seeing that ballpoint pen, I wanted to write. I wanted to scribble, to write letters.

Seeing that book, I wanted to read sentences. I wanted to melt down the sentences one by one in my mouth and swallow them. Touching the smooth cover and gazing at the title, *Annam*, for a long time, I opened the thin book to a random page. I held it up to the fire.

*They died alone, far from their country, and far from war.*

I put the book down.

The sentence wounded me. One by one, the words rolled down and crashed like boulders before my eyes. I couldn't process the line despite its brevity.

—Wanna read it? I really like that book.

I felt even more inclined to read it since Jina liked it, but considering how much a single sentence could shock me ... I didn't think I could read the whole thing. I slowly shook my head.

—Try it. I'll give it to you as a present. A Christmas present. You gave me one.

With a playful chuckle, Jina placed the book inside my overcoat. I adjusted my coat as I recalled the sentence I'd just read. The words turned into sharp rocks that rolled painfully inside my head.

Gunji mumbled,

—But today's not Christmas.

—Everyone has a Christmas of their own. If you don't have one, you should make one, too.

Jina suddenly grabbed a plastic pouch from the pile she was digging through. It was a travel toiletry set, an object as astounding as the earphones had been. She made an announcement.

—Let's take a bath.

Jina held out a disposable razor to Gunji.

—You should shave a little. I can give you a haircut as well if you want.  
Running his fingers through his hair, Gunji feigned a look of disgust.

—Don't I look kinda like Won Bin with my hair grown out?

I was surprised again. *Won Bin*. What an incredible thing to say. A name I hadn't thought of even once since the disaster. Gunji made a habit of combing his hair in the side mirror; had he been thinking about an actor all along?

—Sometimes like Kang Dong-won.

Gunji kept saying these incredible things. Jina didn't even pretend to listen. Joy stared only at his lips. Inside this decent house—sitting between Jina and Gunji, who held their heads high even when met with misfortune and despair—I became youthful for the first time in a while. I poked fun at Gunji and shared childhood stories. I laughed, and it wasn't a dream.

I lit a candle and put a glass cover over it, lighting up the bathroom. Jina, Joy, and I filled the bathtub with water we'd boiled outside, then undressed side by side. Bodies so scrawny that our bones looked like they'd pierce the skin any minute. Moving cast a shadow between each and every bone. Jina and I bathed Joy first with the warm water and a single bar of soap.

Jina muttered, wiping Joy's back.

—You're so thin, I don't know where to touch.

We were all like that. How nice it would be if we didn't die from getting thinner, but simply grew small like dust? Then no one would be able to hurt us. Jina looked at me and commented on my skin. My body was pale, but my face and hands were the color of dirt. I wanted to take a look at my whole body, but I could only see down to my collarbones in the bathroom mirror. My reflection, which I hadn't seen in a while, felt unfamiliar and awkward. But splashing myself with warm water and simply being close to Jina made me feel free. We shared silly jokes and kept giggling as if under a spell. Joy watched me uneasily as I laughed. I tapped my chin with my right pinky finger,

—It's fine.

I dried Joy's wet body, adding,

—We're happy because you're pretty.

Jina tapped her chin with her pinky.

—Does this mean *fine*?

—Yeah.

—How about this?

—Pretty.

—Ah.

Jina put her index finger on Joy's dimple and rotated it slightly. I clothed Joy in her long johns and let her out first; only the two of us remained. Jina's hair looked even redder when wet. White steam bloomed from our bodies soaked in warm water. I pulled her toward me and stood in front of the mirror together. I was more used to Jina's face than my own. I could look at her with ease. Gazing at her reflection, I stroked her hair. She was warm. Her earlobes were soft, and the curve of her neck was like that of a violin. I traced my fingers against her skin as if stroking violin strings, before slightly rotating my index finger on her cheek. Suddenly I remembered Dad's last moments. I remembered the people who'd died. I remembered the man whose neck I'd sliced open with my jackknife. I was reminded of the gushing blood, of the night I spent in the forest covered in that blood trying to erase the memory in blood-stiffened clothes and with cold eyes. All at once, I remembered the blows that had fallen like hail and the languages I couldn't understand. I almost considered myself lucky. To be alive like this. Had the world remained as before, could I have met Jina? Noticing my frozen expression, Jina hugged me tightly. She patted me gently on the back and stroked my head. She tapped my chin a couple of times with her pinky. That gesture, meaning *fine*, became her knock at my door, and we kissed as though we were magnetically drawn to each other. All the spite inside my body melted away. Jina led me to the bathtub. In the warm water, I leaned against Jina and found her lips again and again. I found her soft breasts, the bridge of her nose, her eyelashes.

—We're starting here, and now.

I remembered Jina's words that'd been hidden in the shade: *You only live once, and there's no such thing as what if. The world is coming to an end, but we found each other. So it's fine. It'd even be fine to consider ourselves lucky in this moment.*

Gunji urgently knocked on the door.

—Sis, when are you getting out? I want to wash up, too.

I wanted to live each day as though it were a lifetime. I wanted to become Jina. If I couldn't, I'd rather leave her side. I wanted to stop feeling the differences between us. Fearing separation, we embraced to become one, as if to show each other our bare hearts, as if to check what *this* was before naming it. As if sharing each other in this way was our only hope brushing past us.

## *Gunji*

Feeling all nice and clean after my bath, I walked outside with Joy. A few people from the family had a fire going and fed me some reheated lamb. I grabbed my sleeping bag from the truck and started back towards Jina and Dori. Just then, a group of gunmen emerged from the dark. Jina's dad tried to negotiate with them, but they wanted everything. The food, the gas, the box trucks, and even the women. Once Jina's dad tried to run them over, the men dispersed, firing their guns. I grabbed Joy in my arms and flattened our bodies against a shadowy wall. I heard the gunshots but couldn't tell where the bullets were landing or where they were coming from. It was mayhem. Joy wailed in fear, gasping for breath.

—Don't worry, Joy. Your sister's in the house. It'll be fine. Just take care of yourself.

I whispered to calm her down, not that she could hear what I was saying. I had no choice but to put my hand over her mouth. My hand was so big and Joy's face was so small that my hand was practically swallowing her whole. I was scared. I wanted to burrow into the ground like a mole. Just then, Dori ran out of the house. She looked all around for Joy without crouching one bit, seemingly unfazed by the bullets. Then Jina ran out, too. Bullet casings bounced off the door and window frames. Dori shoved Jina back inside and ducked. One of the box trucks spun around the vegetable garden and braked hard, blocking the front door of the house. The gunshots got louder. I called to Dori. She sprinted back inside with Joy in her arms and got down on her stomach. Dori cried.

When the gunshots died down, I took a quick look outside. Some people were making a run for the main road. The gunshots started up again, and two of the runners stumbled. One fell as the other went on dragging his leg. Jina's dad got out of the truck and inspected the fallen bodies. He barked an expletive. The rest of the family, crawling out of their hiding spots, crowded around him. Taewoo was sprawled on the ground. Jina's dad stared her down.

—Take a good look at who died.

He grabbed Jina's chin with his hand, forced her gaze at Taewoo, and spat out the words like an old piece of gum.

—This could've been you.

Jina closed her eyes. Her dad shoved her into the truck like an animal, then started yelling at Dori.

—My daughter almost died because of you.

—But she didn't.

—She'd be dead if it weren't for me!

—You know, I could end up dead because of her, too.

Jina's dad punched Dori in the face. I froze. He never killed or hit anyone as long as they weren't trying to rob us. He usually didn't yell, either. But he punched Dori. Jina jumped out of the truck. Stumbling, Dori pulled Joy's knit hat down to her chin and handed her over to me.

—If I had a gun, I would've fired it. Just like you.

Jina's dad hit her again. Jina tried to hold him back.

—Stop it, Dad.

She clung to him in tears.

—I probably could've saved him.

—Oh, you think I should just hand over my gun to you?

Every blow pushed Dori back several steps. Jina screamed and grabbed her dad, but he didn't budge. Instead, he pulled her off by swinging his arms like a giant tree swept by fierce winds and continued beating Dori. The older folks' eyes flashed in the dark. Everyone seemed to believe that Taewoo died because of Dori. Really. That Jina could have died because of Dori. That something worse could happen because of Dori. That nothing would've happened tonight if Dori hadn't been with us.

A tire had burst, and the cargo hold had become riddled with bullet holes. The older folks decided to quickly patch them up and take turns standing guard. Dori disappeared into the vacant house with Joy. Jina was kept inside the truck under her dad's orders. The older guys drank vodka on guard duty. I poked around the vegetable garden and nearby bushes for dry branches. I was scared of the campfire dying down. The bandits could strike again as soon as the fire went out. The sky was dark and moonless. I remembered Dori's swollen face. She'd spat a lot of blood after Jina's dad beat her up. Her teeth might be broken. I felt ashamed, pathetic. I'd been too scared to stop him or even take one step closer to her. I hated it. It felt like being back at school. I thought about boiling some water for

Dori. She'll need clean water to treat her wounds. Plus, she likes warm things. She likes to hold a cup of warm water and sip slowly. Why did Jina's dad beat Dori? Why was he blaming everything on her? I was also shocked to see Taewoo's lifeless body and still couldn't believe he was dead. We weren't that close since he treated me like a kid and talked kind of rough, but he'd offered to teach me how to drive one day and gave me a shot of vodka once when the adults weren't looking. A man should know how to throw back some liquor, he'd said, teaching me how to properly hold my breath. Auntie cried silently with Taewoo dead in her arms. She muttered,

—Who knew that my young, handsome, unwed son would endure every hardship, only to get shot in a foreign land?

She cursed at the sky,

—If you had to take someone, why not those useless bitches? Why did it have to be my precious son?

Her words scared me. Kids at school used to call me a cursed son of a bitch. Whenever they were yelled at by their teachers or dumped by their girlfriends or didn't get an allowance from their parents or were bullied by the older kids, whenever they dropped their food, whenever it was rainy or windy outside, whenever flies were buzzing around, whenever they were annoyed for whatever reason, they said it was my fault. They beat me, blaming me for everything. Reasons for my beatings were widely available. The world existed to prove that I was, in fact, a cursed son of a bitch. My father did as well. He said everything was my fault and my mom's fault. That Mom and I were ruining his life. But it was actually the other way around. He ruined our family. When Mom died and he had to bear all his misfortunes alone, he killed himself.

Dori won't be able to leave with us.

No matter how much Jina pleaded.

I really wanted to let Dori know that I was different, that I didn't think like the others, even though I hadn't been able to stop Jina's dad. Would that comfort her? But Dori was someone who doesn't need to be comforted. Someone who runs away from stuff like that. Even as I heated the water, I wondered if something like this would help. But I also felt that if I didn't at least offer her warm water—if I didn't walk over pretending to offer some—I'd never get to see her ever again.

Avoiding the adults, I went in through the back door. I stepped into the living room with the flashlight on and saw a sleeping bag. It was just Joy in there. She was asleep, wearing a troubled expression. I left the warm water by her side and called out to Dori. Then I heard dull sounds coming from somewhere. Maybe the

bathroom. I called out to Dori again, louder this time. Low curses leaked out from behind the bathroom door. I felt a chill. Moaning. Stifled moaning. The sound of people scuffling, hitting each other, getting hit. Someone being shoved around. I ran to the bathroom. The door wouldn't open, so I kicked it more than a dozen times. I snuck my hand through the broken wood and unlocked the door. Dori was gagged and trapped in the tub. Her pants had been stripped off. Her hand was shaking, still holding her jackknife. With her whole body trembling, her hair and face soaked in blood, Dori glared at me with keen eyes. She stared down the flashlight without surrendering. I couldn't move. I was locked in her eyes.

An instant. Thirty, ten, no—it couldn't have been more than five seconds. But it was long and heavy. I was scared. It was intense. Everything felt so slow, like my heart had stopped, but I was out of breath, and all the hours I'd lived poured out in that breathless pause. I felt every feeling I'd felt since birth. I searched for a familiar feeling. Did I know anything close to this?

Dori cut the gag with her jackknife. She slipped a bunch of times trying to get up from the tub. I walked over and helped her out. Little Uncle was sprawled out on the bathroom floor. Blood gushed from his neck. Dori put her clothes back on and picked a revolver off the floor. It was the one Little Uncle always carried. Dori stumbled out to the living room, hugged Joy, and gently shook her awake.

—Sis. The water over there ...

Our eyes met. I couldn't see very well in the dark, but I certainly felt it.

—It should be warm. Wash your face a bit.

She kept her eyes on me, shoving the sleeping bag into her backpack.

—Hurry. Joy will startle if she sees.

—Why did you come.

She asked in a low voice.

—Were you gonna, just like that bastard ...

—No! You think I'm crazy?

—Then why.

—Because I'm worried. You know why.

I got closer and helped her pack up. She scooped some water and rinsed the blood off her face. I heard the front door open in the other room.

—Still at it?

The voice belonged to Big Uncle, who'd been drinking vodka during his guard shift.

—Just finish up already. Seongcheol's waiting, too.

Dori hastily woke Joy, stepped in front of her, and threw on her backpack.

—What about the mute? What are we doing with her?

Seongcheol's voice.

—We have to make good money off her. Those crazy bastards are out to eat kid liver ...

Big Uncle yammered, turning the doorknob. Dori and I held our breath waiting for the door to shut. Then he stood still without finishing his sentence. Dori raised the revolver slowly to her chest. Silence and darkness choked the house. Suddenly a flashlight beam poured into the living room where we were.

—Wait a minute.

I addressed him first. Realizing the situation, he quickly pulled out his gun. Dori aimed back at him. If someone shoots, whoever it is, it's over. I got in between them and tried to block their view. Big Uncle yelled for backup. It was obvious. They were going to kill Dori. What do I do now? What do I do? I looked around. There was a window behind Dori. And a road past that window.

—Sis. The window.

I whispered, then immediately tackled Big Uncle. I heard a gunshot. We wrestled about. All the adults ran into the house. Flashlight beams cluttered the living room. Someone saw the bathroom and cursed. They cursed and damned Dori. They damned her and cried.

—We have to catch that fucking bitch right now and kill her.

Big Uncle kicked me. He drove me into a corner and trampled me. They'd tried to rape her. At least three of them did. Had Jina's dad tried to do it, too? Was today the first time this had happened? Had Dori been safe all along? I'd thought she'd be safe with us. I'd thought the adults were protecting us with their guns and trucks. I'd believed that horrible, dangerous people only existed outside our box trucks. How far will Dori go? Will we meet again? I should've stopped Jina's dad when he was beating Dori. I should've never left her alone. If I had done that, then this wouldn't have happened, right? Or was this something that was bound to happen? I found the word for the feeling that'd struck me when I was caught frozen in her eyes. But I won't say what it is. I'll keep it a secret until I die. And I won't forget. If something like this happens to me again, if someone tries to beat or kill me for no reason, I'll remember Dori's glare. I'll never forgive again.

## *Jina*

If I let the day break like this, Dori will vanish, I thought. I had to find a way to be with her. Despite managing to escape the truck without alerting my dad, I couldn't run straight to the house because of the older folks in the vegetable garden. I was circling to the back door when I heard Big Uncle calling people over from inside the house. Why was he inside? I sprinted to the door. With the sound of gunfire, a small shadow popped out of a window. Two tangled shadows darted down the dark road. I called out to her exactly once, but Dori only glanced back. She kept running, and I ran after her. I heard gunfire coming from the window. It was the older folks. I turned and screamed for them to stop. The shooting stopped. The older folks called my name to check on me. I looked around for Dori, but she'd already vanished. Even when I ran and ran in the direction she disappeared, I only found a deep darkness. The trees wailed with the wind. The darkness grew deeper with each cry. My body, heavier. I couldn't keep my balance as I tried to stand still and exhale. I stumbled a few steps before dropping to the ground. I felt trapped in the dark.

—Jina.

I looked all around me. Dark houses. Dark windows. Trees armed with dark thorns. Snow flurries blowing in the wind.

—I have to go.

Panting, I spun around. I could only hear her.

—I killed your uncle.

I couldn't move.

—I'm not sure. He's probably dead.

I couldn't speak.

—He raped me.

Her voice wavered.

—Jina.

Dori called my name.

—Do you want to come with me?

Everything froze, or so it felt. I looked back. Flashlight beams bounced erratically in the distance. I couldn't respond. I couldn't decide. Just the thought that I couldn't part... But with whom? The beams grew closer. They were sprinting over to kill Dori. On the road, hesitation tormented everyone.

I shook my head.

Feet thudded as they charged toward us. Two shadows, small and dark, disappeared between large needle-leaf trees. Tears rushed to my eyes. Where are you going? Where? Multiple footsteps drew close, then ran past me. Where am I supposed to go? A thick hand grabbed my shoulder. I shuddered as if he'd doused me in sewage. I screamed at him to get off me. Everyone was bad. Everyone who didn't die, who survived, who couldn't help but continue to live like this, was bad. If we survived, if we somehow survived these horrors, we shouldn't be this way. It was possible for us *not* to be this way. Why were we ruining it? Why were we making life harder?

Snow poured down.

Daybreak came slowly.

I clipped Dori's nails with a rusty pair of scissors I found in the kitchen. Her nails broke off like withered bark at the metal's slightest touch. I shined the flashlight on her nail clippings.

—Does it hurt?

Shaking her head, Dori spoke slowly and quietly.

—A little, but it's fine. I want you to keep touching it.

I coaxed her fingertips with my tongue, my saliva, as I finished clipping her nails.

—I'll cut your hair, too, when the sun comes up. Give you a nice little bob.

The wind rattled the window. By wavering candlelight, our dark shadows danced a slow dance on the wall.

—Do you know this song?

Dori softly hummed a tune. I'd never heard it before. I asked her what the title was.

—*Ma rendi pur contento*, I think.

—*Ma rendi pur...*

—Contento.

—Contento. What does that mean?

Dori shook her head. She said she'd heard it first last spring on a nighttime radio show.

—I liked it so much, I wrote down the title and listened to it often. I thought I should look up the translated lyrics, but I kept putting it off. I should've done it while we still had the internet. Now I'll never know.

—Where's it from?

—It's an Italian operatic aria. I don't even know what it's about, but I keep thinking about it. I must've sung it to myself thousands of times while walking with Joy.

—Do you still do that?

Dori nodded her head. I'd wondered what she thought about whenever she looked off with one of her unknowable expressions. She must've been repeating this unknowable song. I tried to imagine the workings of Dori's mind. The mind that recalls an Italian song on Russian soil and thinks, Now I'll never know its meaning.

—Dori, it's like how I see you.

—What?

—I keep thinking about you without knowing what's going on inside you.

Dori laughed a little and looked intently at me. She asked, —Weren't you surprised ... when you first saw me?

—When I first saw you?

—Yeah.

—Of course I was.

—You didn't seem like it. You made casual conversation, walked over, you know?

—I was in awe. Amazed. That's why.

—Amazed?

—Yeah. You were like a mirage or something. Like someone put you there. I wanted to make sure that what I was seeing was real. But you didn't answer. Or laugh, even.

—I was scared.

—When you first saw me?

—Yeah.

—Why?

—Because you're human.

I paused before saying,

—When we were little, we only had to be scared of ghosts.

—Bet you'd still be scared if you saw a ghost right now.

—My mom saw ghosts sometimes.

—Did she talk with them?

—No, she said the ghost would go away when she recognized what it was.

—Maybe ghosts are scared of humans, too.

—I had a friend in high school who was really good at singing. She was super shy and didn't talk much, and her face would get all red when she had to stand in front of people ... But she was a completely different person when she sang. She made me realize what it meant to be born with talent. I thought I'd hear more from her after graduation. I totally thought she'd become a singer. Then ... on her way home from her part-time job, a stranger ... You know how some murders are said to be *random*?

—...

—People say that. As if there's no reason. A person dies, and they say there's no reason. I didn't understand what they meant at the time, but now I'm scared to know the reason. Ghosts don't scare me anymore.

—Jina.

Dori took out her jackknife and held it out to me. She asked,

—Do you want this?

—Why?

—...

—This one's yours. Don't ever lose it, don't ever give it to anyone, and don't let anyone take it from you. With every new person you meet, you have to act like you did when you first met me.

—Someone can die from an itty-bitty thing like this.

—Exactly.

—...

—Don't die, Dori.

—...

—Whatever happens, we have to make it out alive together. —Together? How?

—We can make it out alive if we stay together.

We were still talking and gazing into each other's eyes when we heard gunshots. Dori had run out to find Joy. She'd cried. She'd been beaten and

trapped. I'd clearly said we'd stay together. I'd brought it up. This wasn't even a day ago.

*How could she kill someone over a thing like that? She's vicious, depraved. From the looks of it, she's killed more than a few. She was probably robbing people in Korea before she got here. There's a reason why she never talked, especially about herself. We brought a murderer all the way out here. If she'd cooperated, we could've let her loose nicely with her sister. In this world we live in, it's not that big of a deal to let someone have a go with your body. I mean, did she really think she was going to ride the truck for free ...*

—They've all gone crazy.

—Your uncle is dead.

—Dad, did you know about this?

—That bitch killed my brother.

—Were you in on it, too?

—Two of our family members are dead because of that bitch!

—Someday I'll end up like that, huh?

—That's never going to happen. You think I'll let that happen?

—You don't think they're going to touch me? Because I'm family?

—Don't insult your family.

—I didn't insult them. They did it to themselves.

—Jina. Snap out of it.

—I don't know.

I shook my head.

—There's no such thing as never going to happen.

His face froze.

—She mocked us. We treated her like family, but she was just trying to use us. She never bowed her head, even after she put you in danger. She's a bad seed.

Dad was lying.

—You're not a good judge of character yet. You think everyone's good as long as you like them.

I wanted to spit in his face. I felt bad for him. I was scared of him. He loved me. I loved him, too. But I wanted to spit at him. If Dad raped and killed Dori—but how was that possible? But it could very well have happened.

—I didn't suspect the family. There's no such thing as good or bad when it comes to family. Do you know how many times I told her that our family would never do anything bad? But we're all plenty bad. We're capable of even worse. I know that now. So I'm going to protect myself. You protect yourself. Please, protect yourself from doing worse!

Dad grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me.

—Look closely at who's going to protect you!

I looked around. My relatives were watching me. They watched me, completely wrecked and in tears. I recalled their names. Not *Uncle* or *Auntie*, but their proper names. When I matched names to faces, these people felt like strangers. I didn't see family. We could easily betray each other. We could beat and abandon each other. We could rape and kill each other. Dad's conviction that family would never do that to each other was as thin as Bible pages. He drove Dori out in order to protect that weak thing. I know Dad would do anything for me. Is that why he tried to beat, rape, and kill Dori? Who was that actually for? These awful questions.

The family came to an agreement that they couldn't forgive Gunji. *Would he have helped Dori if it'd been his own uncle on the floor? This is why you don't take in strays.* I couldn't send Gunji away as well. I'd lose my mirror. Like a honeybee living among wasps, I'd think I'm a wasp and eventually end up becoming a wasp. I'd live on as a wasp. I'd mock flowers and honey and butterflies. I clung to Gunji and cried. I begged him not to go.

—It's fine, sister. Don't cry. Don't worry. We'll meet again.

This is what he'd said.

## *Ryu*

Leaving the sisters on the road with a few cans, watching them grow smaller and smaller in the side mirror, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had discarded something valuable. The little one looked around Haerim's age. The older one remained guarded, her gaze icy. She seemed to accept my token of appreciation as a transaction. Will those youngsters survive? How far will they get? Curiosity quickly turned into alarm: Will we survive? How far will we get? I tried to stop thinking. I wished to never see them on the road again, to soon forget them. But my memories were strangely connected; whenever I thought about Haerim, I was reminded of those two youngsters. I was always thinking about Haerim.

Dan wanted to cross the border to Europe. He believed that a system for survivors would be in place, that we could start fresh there. To me, his faith sounded no different from a sermon asserting the existence of Heaven.

There was a time when we used to look everything up on our phones. Back when we lived according to information received through virtual windows, worshipping the latest technologies like they were God himself. Dan hadn't moved on from those days. He tried to solve present problems with past logic. Dan wished for a new life that was identical to the world we had already lived and failed in. News outlets and social media overflowed with information after the virus struck, just as they had before. The live updates refreshed too quickly. I could not distinguish what was real from what was fake. Certain pieces of information, inflated by rumor and conspiracy, prevailed and turned the real disaster into a joke. So we grew numb. Concern soon cooled to indifference, and we shrugged it all off. Oh, this again. I'm sure it'll be fine eventually. But now we didn't need the news to know the truth. We saw the ruins and the corpses, the bandits and the looters on the road. That was our world. We had all become refugees.

There are some people who rise slowly from sleep. Who push away the morning the more you urge them to wake up. My only wish was for Dan not to lose his mind.

That said, I wanted to believe. In Dan, who was certain that a new world would appear once we at last crossed this vast continent and the border. If there was a world where I could still dream of tomorrow without the help of a miracle, I wanted to make a grave for Haerim there. I wanted to burn her pajamas, which I'd brought from Korea, and bury the ashes in a land out of harm's way and plant a tree as a small marker. I wanted to watch the tree grow little by little.

We drove for over two weeks. We slept in the car and we ate in the car. Our limbs stiffened and our headaches never went away. We tried to fill up on gas in every city we drove through, but it wasn't easy. Driving down the endless road, I couldn't help but contemplate where we were headed, and why. It felt like spinning in a hamster wheel. Can't there be another way besides barreling forward like this? What if we're the only ones who haven't figured it out? There's no way that everyone else is wasting their time like this ... These thoughts weren't new. Constant doubts that had followed me into adulthood, questions I'd asked myself long before the virus shrouded the world ... How was it I had the same thoughts, even after the whole ordeal of risking our lives to escape Korea? I was ultimately no different from Dan in that the global calamity had changed neither my thought process nor my concerns. I was like an out-of-date GPS system. Or someone who'd ask the same question in any given situation. Someone who'd fret about the possibility of a better option while sighing out their last breath.

We parked in the outskirts of the city. If we couldn't fill our tank here, we had no choice but to leave our car behind and move on foot or wait until we found gas. The city was bleak and deserted. With each gust of the winter wind, hollow laughter rang throughout the building. A deranged man staggered by, shaking his fist at the thin air.

Dan got out of the car to look around for supplies. Through the rearview mirror, I watched Haemin sleep. I thought he'd wake up any moment and ask when we were going home. My mind reeled whenever he said something like that. What would it have been like if we hadn't left Korea? Could we have kept Haemin safe? No amount of driving could erase my memories of that place. Streets filled with wailing lunacy, people consumed by rage and fear, killing and breaking and igniting whatever was in front of them. Those memories didn't seem to drift away but rather actively chase after us. Like a creature charging at us at hurricane speed. Were we really alive? Or had we already died and descended into hell? What if this was our punishment? Forever in fear. Forever on the run.

Dan used to always fall asleep on the living room sofa watching TV. I couldn't sleep with any light or sound on. But when I closed the bedroom door and lay in bed, I only became more sensitive to the muffled sound of the TV. Many nights, my senses hung by a thread of sleep as I waited for the alarm to ring. When it did, I'd wake the kids and Dan, prepare some toast or soup with rice for them, and see them out. I barely got to wash my face and put on any old clothes before leaving the house myself.

I was in charge of consultation and clerical work at a travel agency downtown. Bangkok, Phuket, Cebu, Boracay, Hanoi, Taipei, Bali ... I promoted destinations I knew only by name and helped clients with their itineraries, pretending like I'd vacationed there hundreds of times. Back then, the world was not at all vast to me. I thought the Earth was quite small, considering how my clients could reach distant countries in a day or two by plane. I used to cross time zones like a frequent flyer in my own way; summer would feel like yesterday before I realized it was the holiday season, and the months between Chuseok and the Lunar New Year would feel like mere days. In surprise, the whole year would fly by. I tracked each month by payday. Money was funneled out of my bank account on set dates. Despite our steady incomes, we were always pinched for money. We'd postpone important events or do them cursorily: family vacations, family photos, birthday parties, compliments and consolations, greetings like How was your day? You've grown so tall!, hugging and saying I love you, cherishing today and looking forward to tomorrow, wordlessly checking in, wishing good night.

I'd come to my senses and find myself yelling at the kids. It was no use trying to compose myself, telling myself not to act this way. If not the kids, then I got mad at the plates in the kitchen sink. I got mad at the laundry tangled in the washing machine. I got mad at the noisy vacuum cleaner in my hand. I got mad at the dust floating in the air. I used the kids' lotion because I couldn't make time to buy my own products. I kept wearing my autumn windbreaker through the end of the year and caught a nasty cold because I didn't have time to drop my winter coats off at the laundromat. Dead houseplants and expired food and off-season clothes and worn-out shoes and recyclable boxes and broken objects piled up around the house without ever finding their place. The house grew smaller, the kids' secrets multiplied, Dan spoke less, and I grew gaunt. I was certainly trying my best, but the thought that my best wasn't good enough occurred to me as relentlessly as the tax bills. Life staggered on, severed at every joint. Me at work, me in front of the kids, me talking to Dan, and me alone were all repulsively dissimilar. This person called *me* felt like a scattered puzzle. I couldn't remember my own image as the puzzle pieces floated around. It felt like something was ever

so slightly askew and that thing would eventually end up dislocating everything. Me from myself. Me from Dan. Me from my children.

Once, Haerim hurt herself badly falling down the stairs at after-school tutoring. She had scars on her face, bruises all over her body, and a cast on her arm. After pleading with my boss, I didn't go into work for three days. I went over budget on a single room at the hospital. I looked after Haerim and Haemin in the clean, quiet room. That time I spent with my children felt like a vacation. Like the chocolate garnish on a cake, the *Congratulations!* written in cursive. Even as she complained that her sides hurt, Haerim laughed often and ate the hospital food without complaining about the side dishes.

Although Haemin didn't get hurt—or I assumed he hadn't—he had several scars I didn't know about. Hyeonsu kept kicking him at school, but their kindergarten teacher just told them to play nice and get along. There was also an older kid in his taekwondo class who called him a fucking bastard and bullied him, so Haemin called him a fucking bastard back, but then he was called up to the rooftop stairway and was threatened: The next time you get on my nerves, I'm going to stab your family to death and burn your house down. And since Haemin was scared that his mom, dad, and older sister would die because of him, he followed the older kid's orders to steal a bottle of soju from the convenience store. Later, when he was kicking a soccer ball around by himself in the playground, the ball got stuck in the fence, and his clothes got dirty and his hands all scratched up while he was trying to take it out, worried that his mom would yell at him if he lost the ball, but then it got stuck even deeper, and when he eventually went home empty-handed, his mom was too busy with living to notice that the soccer ball had even disap ...

—Huh? What was I busy with?

—With living. Mom, you said it yourself.

—When did I say that?

—I dunno. But you said it.

I thought that family came first. That I couldn't give up on family. But I had no time to be with them. If I didn't work, then we'd be poor. If we were poor, then the kids would get hurt. It was already difficult for them to make friends. If they didn't live in a luxury apartment, if they didn't attend after-school tutoring like everyone else, they were bullied. Could parental love alone heal those scars? I didn't know how to brush off dirty looks and disrespect. So I couldn't teach my kids how to do that either. Books and certain TV shows sometimes taught me how, but it was like learning how to cook with a recipe and no kitchen. It was

actually easier to make money. However, to bring my children's living conditions up to the average, I had to give up my time with them.

There was a period of time when Dan got off work much later than usual, back when Haerim was just entering school. He'd come home past two or three in the morning a couple times a week. For the first few months, he'd return completely drunk. Then for about half a year, he'd return sober but late. Some nights he didn't come home at all. I suspected he was having an affair but pretended not to notice. I didn't have the energy for nitpicking and tears. I wanted to avoid the inevitable emotional fallout upon his realization that I knew. Divorce felt like a hassle, though I briefly considered it. The prospect of each day was overwhelming enough. I figured that if he was going to come back, he would—and he did. We greeted each other as usual. Without confession or absolution, I purged the memory as though nothing had happened. I thought that if I still remembered Dan's affair when we'd grown old, when there was no more turning back, I could ask him about it then. I didn't want to feel more pain by knowing now.

Am I living well? I don't know when this question first occurred to me. Was it even possible to live well? I think it all started from those questions. Before graduating from college, I feared the uncertainty of tomorrow but remained optimistic that it'd all work out somehow. After bouncing from company to company for three years, I joined a makeup distribution company. My job was to bring American products to Korea; at least it was in a field related to my major. I was shuttling between work and home when I met Dan through a mutual college acquaintance. We grabbed dinner and coffee a couple of times. We couldn't meet or call often because we were both busy, but we always checked in every three days or so. Whenever either of us said we'd been too busy to call, the other took us at our word. We exchanged pleasantries on and off like that for a whole year. Work was more important than dating or marriage, and our feelings were neither hot enough to declare love nor cold enough to call it quits.

When a three-day weekend came up in the summer, Dan suggested a late-night movie. It was past four a.m. when we left the theater. There had been times I was awake at that hour for a work function or overtime, but I hadn't greeted dawn like that in a long while. In a state of pure enjoyment. Dan and I ate cup ramen and kimbap at a convenience store and walked to a neighborhood park with ice cream. It was our first date.

—I only have a bed and a fridge in my apartment.

Dan blurted out.

—Gas stove, dining table, sofa, desk, TV ... I have none of those things.  
'Cause I only sleep there.

I was no different. My room was too small to hold all that furniture anyway.

—Now that I've been living like this for a few years, I wonder if this is really the life I wanted. Every morning on my commute to work, I think that this is enough, but by the time I go home, I can't help but question it.

That also occurred to me daily. The feeling of sitting in an empty playground, swinging back and forth between *this is fine* and *is this fine*.

—If I get married, then I'm going to start living properly. Officially, for real.

I chuckled. What he said reminded me of my senior year in high school, when I told myself that I'd lose weight and go on dates and live like an actual person as soon as I got to college. And my senior year in college, when I told myself that I'd go watch plays and take weekend trips and see my friends all the time and learn how to play the violin as soon as I found a steady job. I was relieved to think that Dan and I were very similar people. It was exactly the feeling I'd been searching for in a partner. Not butterflies or passion, but a sense of relief. Our relationship had started in this way and proceeded without any particular quarrels or resolutions. We weren't suspicious or jealous; we didn't interfere or nag. Did we ever say, I love you? I'm not sure. There had certainly been times when those words were needed, but they passed soon enough. We should go see a musical sometime. Let's make sure to check out that art exhibit next month. Seriously, let's at least take a weekend trip to Jeju Island this year. I think we confirmed our love by exchanging these empty promises. Marriage was the only promise we kept out of the numerous ones we made. Then Haerim was born. I had no one telling me they loved me, so I didn't pass down those words to her. But the year she turned five, Haerim said, I love you, Mom. When I hugged my sweet little child, she ...

Startled, I opened my eyes. Dan was knocking on the car door, gesturing for me to open up. I hastily unlocked the door. He got in, immediately crouched down, and aimed his gun forward. A black mass was slowly approaching from a distance. It looked like a large beast with black fur. The forlorn sensation of Haerim hugging me tight lingered in my stiffened body. Had it been a dream? I had experienced this reality, but how did reality turn into a dream? I turned to Haemin. I don't know when he woke up, but he was staring straight ahead, wide-eyed.

—Hide under your seat.

Haemin followed my orders without tears. The dark mass grew larger and larger as it advanced. It felt like our fate, our interiorities, the shadow of our anxieties and fears lumped together. I didn't think I'd be surprised by whatever it turned out to be. I didn't have the strength to be surprised.

—They're people. I think there's over two, three hundred of them.

Dan was trembling, still aiming his gun. If this many people were to attack us, it was only right for Dan to shoot Haemin and me and kill himself.

A sound reached us before the people did, low and charred like smoke. The people were singing. Shedding tunes, holding crosses and white flags as if in a funeral procession. They were stumbling, looking worn and crestfallen. Crying as if pleading, they passed by us as calmly as a river. I got out of the car, transfixed. Dan held me back. I wanted to ask them: Where did you come from? Where are you going? What are you singing about? They were all singing different songs. The disparate melodies piled one on top of another, approaching us as one. I entered the pack. I had to find someone with whom I could talk. I made conversation cobbling together English and Korean. A bony woman grabbed my wrist. I could barely understand her through her sobs. She said there was an armed gang at every border, killing people and seizing possessions and accumulating power. Cities had become human slaughterhouses. Those who survived, intoxicated by the stench and smoke from burning the dead, were turning into crazed demons. War did not know day from night. A red stream had begun to flow on the frozen land, and everything had been brutally demolished. The woman clung to me.

—We must go together. We mustn't die. This world is hell, so we're already evil for staying alive, no matter how good we try to be. We must stick together. We must look into each other's eyes and touch each other and sing and not forget our humanity, not even for a moment.

I lifted my head and looked all around. I saw faces in windows. There were only a few, but some people came out of buildings and joined the pack.

Dan grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the crowd. I relayed the woman's words. He wasn't having it.

—We can't believe everything that crazy people say.

—Sure, she might be crazy. But there were children, too. That means they haven't gone crazy enough to sell children or eat their livers.

Dan bit his lips, looking conflicted. Let's follow them—I only just held back these words that filled my throat. He was also holding something back. He chewed his lips and exhaled nervously. We stood on the road, delaying a decision, until we could no longer distinguish the singing from the wind. Were her words facts or predictions? Should we go to the border or stay here? The nearest border was Kazakhstan. Were there gangs there, too? What would change by walking across the border? If we were to survive by mere luck, where would we find ourselves? Was there such a thing as a *better* option? I still didn't know the

meaning of this search for survival. I met eyes with Haemin, who was watching us with his face pressed against the car window. He wasn't crying, even without his mom and dad next to him. He looked at us blankly, still looking a little sleepy, like he was watching a cartoon. He rubbed his eyes and picked his nose. —It's fine.

I muttered as I returned to the car. I opened the backseat door and hugged Haemin, feeling the watchful gaze of people behind curtains.

—It's fine. This is part of life.

Patting Haemin's back, I consoled myself.

—Mom, I gotta pee.

Haemin wriggled in my arms. To protect what should be protected, to avoid what should be avoided, to not believe anyone too easily. To retain a sense of shame if I ended up doing something I shouldn't. To question why I was still alive today. That was life in Korea. Life here wasn't any different. No, it was different. I could pay attention to my loved ones here. I could carefully see, hear, and cherish their words and actions. I couldn't do that in Korea. I shelved precious people. Because there was always tomorrow. Because we could do it another time. Because we believed in a long, long future. That was no longer an option.

I got out of the car and wrapped Haemin in my coat. He stepped into an alley and paused before dropping his pants.

—Don't look.

—Okay, I won't.

I turned away but looked over my shoulder. Haemin's clear urine wetted the building exterior, blooming white steam. His body heat made visible. He called me over. Pretending like I hadn't been watching, I took a moment to walk over before I hugged him. Even as he twisted his body shyly, Haemin did not push me away. I had to protect him. I must not forget what it means to be human. If Haemin asks me again when we're going home, I must answer him. I must explain to the best of my ability. My life of putting things off was over. I must tell him, I love you.

## *Dori*

For days I lay in the remote warehouse with a blanket over my face. I fell into deep sleep but was startled awake repeatedly. I couldn't recuperate. My mouth stayed dry, no matter how much snow I boiled and drank. I wanted to talk to Joy, but my eyes kept closing. I couldn't stave it off no matter how hard I tried. Whether it was sleep or death, I couldn't tell.

I was scared. What if I'd caught the disease that took Mom? My mental anguish far exceeded any physical symptoms. Fear was like a large hand gripping me by the throat, dragging me somewhere close to death. I wanted to make a deal. If there were anything left in my life that could be exchanged for death, I would gladly give it up, whatever it was. Despite doing everything to survive, I was still preoccupied with death. I was too busy thinking about why we die, why we had to die, why we have to die, and what comes after death, that I didn't think to think about life. I was wrapped up in thoughts like, If Joy dies, I'll— If I die, Joy will— I shouldn't have done that. I needed to live in the moment. I should've left future matters for the future.

Faintly, I could make out Joy peering down at me. She ruffled through my knapsack and took out our last canned items. Two cans of beans from the woman on the road. Joy boiled the cans in melted snow and spooned a few beans into my mouth at a time. I gagged but held it in. She fed me slowly, patiently, and persistently.

I opened my eyes.

Joy was nowhere in sight.

My mind became as clear and cold as the winter sky. My limbs ached but didn't feel heavy. I walked out of the door and looked for footprints. Everything had been erased by the pouring snow. I couldn't reach Joy once she was out of sight; she wouldn't hear no matter how loudly I called out to her. I stood completely still, searching for sounds. I could only hear clumps of snow falling from the trees. I couldn't tell whether it was about to be sunset or sunrise. I

couldn't even tell how long I'd slept. But verge of death or not, I'd know if someone had taken Joy. I'd know even from the grave. If Joy had walked out herself, if I were Joy ... I looked around. Near the warehouse there was a house with all of its windows broken. I pulled out the revolver and opened the front door. I searched the house, but she wasn't there. I stepped through the fence gate and stood in the middle of the road. Wooden houses were closely packed together on either side.

I felt utterly alone in the world.

Something not unlike loneliness. This ridiculous feeling I tried to brush aside, the dread clinging to me like white lint on a black shirt. I was scared and bored of being scared. The feeling stuck so close that it felt like a part of me. Where did everyone go? How did the world become so barren of people? Looking left and right, I still couldn't decide which way to go. I felt like I'd grow farther from Joy whichever way I went. I decided to count to a hundred first. One hundred passed in no time. I counted to one hundred again. I anxiously looked around. The day was getting darker. Holding onto the fence, I started along the path on the right. I reached a street corner after six houses. There, I turned around. My tiny angel was at the end of the road, approaching with quick, short steps. I ran over to her. I fell over multiple times. Joy looked surprised, wiping her face with her sleeves. When I started crying, she held out her arms and hugged me.

Joy took out dried corn kernels and a lighter from her coat pocket. Plus dry pasta wrapped in paper. She said she'd found them in a vacant house on the corner. There was more food to bring over. The house wasn't big, but a book collection lined the walls and kept the house warm.

—Don't ever go off on your own again.

Joy read my lips.

—I can't just sit around while you're in pain.

—But still. Don't go off on your own.

—I can handle this sort of thing now.

I signed back with big, slow motions,

—What I mean is, don't leave me on my own.

There really were a lot of books. And a wide desk, too. I looked through each book filled with unrecognizable letters. I'd hoped to find a map but didn't. No dictionary either. If I could read the storefronts and signposts, if I could understand the language, we'd be safer. We should head to the city once my health improves. We have to find a bookstore. My mind was slightly put at ease now that I had a goal. I had motivation.

After laying out our blankets and sleeping bags under the large desk, I told Joy to get some sleep. I found a bucket in the backyard and collected some snow. I made a fire and melted the snow in the kitchen with wide windows. I wetted some pages in warm water and wiped the blood left on my skin. There was dried blood all over my thighs, chest, stomach, shoulders, and armpits. Joy crawled out of her sleeping bag and leaned against the doorframe, watching me without a word.

—Don't worry. I'm not in pain. Go to sleep.

Actually, I was in pain. My whole body ached. I was barely managing to move.

—What did we do wrong?

I pondered her question.

—Joy. If someone tries to hurt you, don't stay still.

I tried to convey my message as slowly as possible. If I said I hadn't seen it coming, of course that would be a lie. I'd put up my guard the moment we stepped inside that box truck. I wasn't family. I was just some woman they'd picked up. Some of them would blatantly look me up and down when Jina wasn't next to me. A look of contempt and superiority. They always wore this belittling expression as they brushed up against me to intimidate me. It made me feel ... like a bug. They acted like I was unworthy, seeing nothing but my sex. I'd tried my best not to engage them by talking or making eye contact. I'd strived to hide my existence.

Joy looked deep in thought.

—I thought everything was good because we were getting a ride, and Gunji and Jina were there.

So had I. The good things had been so close to us, growing bigger and bigger until they covered the bad things.

—That's my fault.

I held out my thumbs and index fingers and turned them outward. I said,

—It's not wrong to feel good about something.

—I didn't know that you were getting hurt. I was asleep. That's my fault, too. I don't know anything when I close my eyes.

—None of this is your fault. Stop arguing and go to sleep already.

Making an anguished face, Joy tucked herself into her sleeping bag. I'll follow your orders. I don't eat that much either. I'll sleep only a little. I'll do anything you say ... Those phrases popped into my head. Maybe they were from a book or a movie. I was struck with the humiliation and discomfort I'd felt when I'd first encountered them. Once I recalled them, I kept remembering them as if under a spell. I said them aloud to expel them. They didn't roll off the tongue. Joy was

intentionally making things her fault. It was possible that this was a strategy we needed to understand our situation and accept the parting. But I felt uneasy.

That night, I dreamt about Yeonu. I was looking for her at some kind of night market. Amid the crowd of people eating and drinking and shouting, I caught glimpses of the yellow backpack she always used to wear. I called out to her, but she didn't turn around. In order to reach Yeonu I had to cut across a group of middle-aged men boozing and playing with hwatu cards. The men didn't let me pass. I tripped on something. A doorsill, a jagged rock, a foot, I couldn't tell. The thought of Yeonu tripping on the same thing filled me with rage. But in the dream, I couldn't let it out. My screaming produced no sounds, and swinging my fists only drew mocking laughter. After walking around and around the maze-like market, I found an empty lot that had been swept by sandy winds. The blue light of dawn hung in the air. Yeonu approached me on an old scooter. I played it cool to hide the feelings tightening inside my chest. Suddenly we were somewhere else. Yeonu and I were walking on the beach near sunset. The tide was out so it was muddy. There was a lot of people around. Against the evening sun, strong and cast low in the sky, they looked dark like shadows. Dark seagulls hovered. I was annoyed by the wind messing up my hair. I wanted to look nice in front of Yeonu. She was walking ahead when she stooped to pick something up from the mudflat. It was a small note with heavily blurred text. We looked at it closely. Yeonu said,

—I lost this a really long time ago.

—Where did you lose it?

—The day I moved to a new house. It flew away in the wind. —But it's here now?

—After wandering round and round.

—How did it get here?

—The way we did.

Yeonu's hand trembled slightly. I asked,

—What does it say?

With a flurry of wind, the note flew away.

Did I dream about Yeonu because of that book Jina had given me, *Annam*?  
I peered into the darkness.

Will we wander round and round and meet again?

Yeonu used to shelve books in the school library. Sometimes I pushed the cart with her. Between the less-frequented shelves in the two-hundred or three-

hundred sections, we could be left to ourselves for hours. We existed in a time of our own in that quiet, warm space. I'd demanded a promise from her back then: Let's never get married, not even when we get older. I want to marry you but I can't, so promise me you won't do anything with someone else that you can't do with me. I didn't want to imagine Yeonu holding hands or kissing or whispering secrets with her cheek pressed against someone other than me. My own imagination turned me against her. I threw a fit whenever I sensed Yeonu drifting away while fearing my temper would keep us apart. I lashed out in fear then tiptoed around her. Why are you so precious to me? I made her miserable with my tantrums. How could I have been so stupid? Was I any different now? Was I living differently? Once we started at different colleges, we talked less often and broke up without saying much—but I never forgot about Yeonu. Not even a little. My heart beating the way it did meant something. Was Yeonu still alive? Did she see me in her dreams? Did she still want to look nice in front of me, even in a dream?

The light of dawn was making the house appear darker inside. I slipped out of my sleeping bag and took another quick look at the books on the shelf before grabbing Jina's gift from my knapsack. I walked to the window and opened *Annam* to a random page.

*The winter lasted months and months. Only in May did the sun appear.*

I couldn't *not* think about Jina, despite my best efforts. Studying my reflection in a small mirror, I took off my knit hat. I touched my hair, tangled and matted with dried blood.

You said you'd give me a nice little bob.

If Jina were here, she'd say, Let's wait till it's bright outside. She'd tell me to go rinse my hair with warm water. Make me wait until my hair was dry enough to brush it neatly. With a pair of scissors, she'd cut my hair slowly and attentively, careful to keep the length even. I imagined her doing it while looking at my reflection. I picked up the jackknife. I grabbed a handful of hair and snipped it off like weeds. I cut off all the clumps of blood, tousled my hair, and put my hat back on. I picked up the hairs that'd fallen to the floor and threw them in the dying fire.

The snow stopped. My fears vanished. Perhaps they'd been replaced by resignation. If I could set anything aside, I wanted to set some of my worries aside. If I stayed alive, spring would come. How many days had we been in Russia? I had no idea. I asked Joy; she shrugged. February 9th was her birthday. We'd left Korea

in December, so her birthday could be coming up soon. It could've passed already. I should've counted the days.

I held Joy's hand.  
We walked north towards the river.

## *Jina*

I didn't want to speak at all, so I didn't.

I obsessed over Dori's last question. Why had I shaken my head? I thought brooding would make the reason clearer, but it faded further away instead.

My maternal uncle-in-law fell seriously ill. High fever, diarrhea, vomit. We couldn't tell what it was just by the symptoms. We were all afraid that he'd caught the virus. No one went near him. After suffering from visual and auditory hallucinations, he died without receiving proper care. My aunt, alone in her wailing and rage, snatched my father's gun, put it in her mouth, and pulled the trigger. Since both the earth and the river were frozen over, we couldn't bury them. We left their bodies in the forest.

Following a dip in the road, the box truck in front soared and crashed. A tire burst. The driver lost control and the truck tumbled downhill. My uncle in the driver's seat and my cousin sitting next to him died. We placed their bodies between tightly packed trees and covered them in snow.

One box truck and six people remained. A paternal uncle, a maternal uncle, a paternal aunt and her husband, my father, and me. My feelings of despair and helplessness as consequences of the strange virus had dimmed. We could die, not only from the virus or bandits but from a car accident or dehydration. We could shoot each other. Father worried only about the gas. The oil drum grew lighter. The number of cars and people we encountered on the road dwindled as well.

Father said he'd find gas in a big city and take us to Moscow. He'd set his mind on scoping out the western border before crossing. I wanted to ask why we had to keep going. He dismissed the option of staying put as if it were cursed. The endless asphalt, cracked and sunken, cut through the empty plains. Countless times, the truck almost flipped. No one was fazed by the swaying at this point. We'd become so numb, I thought we'd eventually die without realizing it.

Was Gunji on his way to a warm beach? When we first met, Dori had said she was moving in the direction of the sunset. Was she still headed there? When spring arrives, the earth and the river will thaw; the world will turn green. Flowers will bloom, the sun will shine, and berries will bud. Nature will continue its course, unchanged by the gunfire and destruction and murder of humans. I wanted to stay and welcome spring. I wanted to live somewhere with trees and flowers and clear river water, not knowing whether I was human or the wind. I wanted to meet a being who understood shame.

Past a village of small houses, a gradual mountain road appeared. Past the mountain and a frozen reservoir, another similar village appeared. We saw a city of concrete not too far away. I could tell that it was big even before entering. A big city, mercilessly destroyed. Heaps of shattered concrete, building remnants scattered like scraps of paper ... It was strange. These ruins didn't make sense without artillery or an earthquake in the picture. I'd seen numerous abandoned or burned-down houses, but never the kind of destruction where concrete buildings had been pulverized as if a giant had stomped through. Did the bandits in this area have tanks and artillery? After looking through his binoculars, Father jumped down from the truck roof and drove to a secluded path. He said he saw dozens of tanks, rising flames, and people moving in packs. He decided to hide in the mountains and observe for a little longer.

A short time later, we saw a line of army trucks drive up to the city entrance. It looked like a long train loaded with people, cargo, and weapons. Artillery I'd only seen in movies. People who didn't look like soldiers, transporting objects that looked military. Where were they going with these scary objects? Where did these people come from? Something was certainly happening, something unprecedented. We didn't know how closely we'd avoided danger all along. The worst case could've been on my heels the whole time. Watching the line of army trucks charge forth, I couldn't help but think, If we'd arrived a little later or moved a little faster, they would've found us. They might not have hurt us. They might have given us a spot behind their artillery instead of aiming it at us.

But I don't want to be behind or in front of any artillery. I want to get the farthest away from such objects.

Father was convinced that war would break out. The nation has started to take action, he said, mentioning the number of nuclear weapons inside its borders. He said we had to cross the border before any more time passed. Father opened the map and found the nearest border. I didn't understand him. What did he mean by *nation* in this kind of world? Or *military*. If such things still existed, then we wouldn't have been able to leave Korea in the first place. They were bandits

merely pretending to be soldiers. If Father was right—if there were many nuclear weapons on this land and these so-called soldiers had already seized them—then we should escape north, not south or west. We should hide in the mountains and live as beasts. But Father was adamant. He said if we drove without breaks, we'd reach the border in less than a day. He dumped all the fuel left in the drum into the gas tank.

When the darkness deepened, Father climbed on top of the box truck again and observed the city through his binoculars. He sounded possessed once he climbed down.

—They have electricity. They're using electricity. The lights are on in buildings, and there're streetlamps, too.

This meant there was a power plant running. That was a powerful draw. With electricity, we'd be less hungry and cold. My uncle-in-law asked,

—Where are we going?

Father silently fiddled with his binoculars, then announced,

—Let's just go.

—Where? I'm not getting a good feeling about this.

Father sat in the driver's seat.

—Where the hell is he trying to take us? He oughta explain himself.

Grumbling, my aunt stepped into the cargo hold. The box truck quietly entered the road.

Loaded like cargo, we had ridden across more than half of Russia. At first, there wasn't enough room in the cargo hold. There were oil drums and boxes of supplies stacked up. We had to tightly secure them with thick rope so that they wouldn't fall on us. When we lay in our sleeping bags, the cacophony of breathing, sleep talking, and snoring floated around like dust. Now the cargo was nearly empty. The food and oil ran out much more quickly than anticipated. People died from unexpected events. On the road, my relatives shot people whose faces or names they didn't know. They threw Gunji out. And Dori ... Wherever we settled, we'd live on for the rest of our lives carrying wounds from this road. We may have to accept the fact of our survival not as a miracle but as a heavy burden to bear.

Gunshots sounded from every direction. The truck swayed until it swung on to its side. A shower of bullets pierced the cargo hold. The truck abruptly slowed, then stopped. My aunt fell into a corner and lost consciousness. My maternal

uncle tried to open the cargo door, but my paternal uncle-in-law blocked him. My maternal uncle pushed my paternal uncle-in-law aside.

—If we don't leave, we'll have bullet holes from head to toe.

The door opened. It was eerily silent outside. Past the door was a vast field. I sensed bloodthirst amid the silence.

—Let ... let's turn ourselves in. No, sur-surrender ...

The gunshots silenced him. More bullets pierced the cargo hold in rapid succession; my uncle-in-law collapsed. Gunmen surrounded the door, pointing their weapons. We placed our hands on our heads and exited the truck. My father and his younger brother were tied up prone on the asphalt like dead frogs. My maternal uncle was killed emptying his clip on the run. My aunt and I were thrown onto the cold ground. The muzzle of a gun, its absolute terror, pressed against the back of my head.

The gunmen replaced or repaired our tires on the spot. They took all our guns and firearm magazines and moved our few remaining supplies into their own truck. Then they took turns raping me and my aunt. I heard gunfire and sudden brakes, screaming and crying. While others attempting to reach the border were beaten and robbed and killed and captured, I was repeatedly assaulted. The distant red glow swelled beyond the horizon. Ghost sounds accompanied the wind, but I wasn't cold at all. The moon, white and round, rose peacefully to shine down on us. Like someone watching from the sky. Like someone reclining in a cozy armchair by the fire, watching all of this unfold over a strong cup of coffee and walnut pie. I wanted to ask, How many times have you watched this scene? Why won't you turn off the screen! I wanted to flip the sky over like a table. The bandits occupied the road until sunrise and plundered anyone and anything that tried to pass by. There was no life left in Father's eyes. Even as he stared at me, he did not see me.

The gunmen's chatter and laughter did not cease during the robberies and murders. How could they laugh? Were they joking around? What kind of jokes were appropriate in this situation? Were they anything like the jokes we'd shared while roasting lamb over a campfire? I recalled Dori's silent gaze, watching me laugh when we first met. Her dark eyes had lit up with surprise. How did she not slap me in the face? How did she just look at me without cursing or spitting at me? The truck began to move. Collapsed in the cargo hold like a slaughtered pig, I was being driven away to some unknown place. I hoped to never see Dori and Gunji again. Wherever I was headed, I hoped not to see a familiar face.

## *Dori*

- We're going to look for a dictionary and a map once we reach a big city.
- Then?
- Then we can decide where we want to go.
- You said we're looking for summer.
- Summer will come to us even without us looking for it.
- Then why did you say that before?
- Because it was cold.
- It's still cold.
- It is.
- Is this country really big?
- Yeah. Really big.
- Will we not see the same people again?
- Probably not.
- Is everyone headed in different directions?
- I'm not sure.
- They'll punish Gunji.
- Are you worried?
- I have you, but he lost his whole family.
- ... He has Jina.
- Jina is with bad people.
- That's not entirely true.
- We should've left together.
- With Jina?
- Gunji.
- Do you miss him?
- I'm worried about him. That he'll be alone.

Would we be able to see Gunji again? Probably not. I didn't want to harbor some wish about seeing someone again. I'd almost died on several occasions. Death was loitering around me, not yet having found a way to swallow me whole.

—I was really scared when you were sick. Without you, I'm all alone.

—That's not true.

—And without me, you'll be alone.

—That won't happen.

—That's why I went outside. To see what I could do on my own.

—Now that you know, don't go off on your own ever again.

These experiences had caused seismic shifts in Joy's heart. Jumbled everything inside. I was hurting after being beaten and chased by the very people we traveled with. That ... that was different from being attacked by some random stranger on the road. So many questions must've crossed Joy's mind as I lay near dead in that old warehouse. My heart sank just imagining them.

—I want you to get married.

With that, Joy pivoted to something completely unexpected.

—I'm saying, I don't want you to be alone.

Which is to say, my little angel did not think or act like me. —I want there to be three of us, not two. Four would be even better.

She'd been pretending to be fine all this time while racking her brain in the face of fear. Not about where we should go next but how we could be fine, here and now.

—You liked being with Jina and Gunji, huh?

—Yeah, because I learned that we can live a certain way with people like them.

—Good things don't last forever.

—I know.

—...

—I learned something.

—That you can like people?

—That I get lonely when I lose something I like.

—...

—If you get married, you don't have to go separate ways.

—You can separate even if you get married.

—Stupid. You know that's not what I'm saying.

Joy hit her chest and sighed deeply. She looked blankly at the blue sky as if carefully choosing her words, then wrapped her pinky finger around mine.

—I’m telling you to make a promise.

White breath poured from her mouth.

—The promise that you won’t go separate ways no matter what. You make that kind of promise when you get married. In sickness and in health . . .

I stroked her shoulder.

—You can separate even if you promise. People are like that.

—You’re not nice.

Joy looked at me with resentment in her eyes.

—You make it hard for me by only saying not-nice things.

She stomped ahead. Her quivering shoulders suggested crying, but she probably wasn’t. She was just huffing with anger. I ran after her.

—Then will you marry me?

I said this with a smile.

—Why would I marry you?

Joy was serious.

—We don’t need that. We don’t need to make those promises to each other. You’re so stupid.

She was so clearly angry that I couldn’t keep smiling.

—If you promise with another person, and if I promise with another person, we’ll be four. The four that’ll never ever part.

—Okay, fine.

—I’m just scared that it’s only us two.

—I’m scared, too.

I hugged Joy. I didn’t want to put it in a not-nice way. I really didn’t want to say things like That’s just how people are. But didn’t we have to believe that to survive, to get up again? What kinds of things did I grow up hearing? *It’s a dog-eat-dog world out there. Don’t trust anyone so easily. It’s your loss to be nice. You shouldn’t look too obliging. Survival of the fittest. Free-for-all. Winner takes all.* I’d heard them ad nauseam long before the virus spread across the world. Even those who were critical of these phrases still repeated them. Was it possible that the things I said in the name of keeping Joy safe were actually preventing her from dreaming? Was I precluding her from pursuing a different life, limiting her to live only as I did? But Joy, we weren’t the ones who left. We didn’t abandon them. I wanted to be together, I wanted to promise . . . I wanted to put away those thoughts for now.

Then later, when my mind's in a better place, I could take them out and look at them again.

At every village we reached, we scoured vacant houses for food. We encountered some elderly people who'd stayed in their homes. Those who believed they could recover in the spring with the sun and their land. Privy to the local geography and conditions, they didn't look past their provisions from the mountains and river. They returned all their thanks and glory to God ... The young people must've either died or left. If they were passionate, if they believed there were more days ahead, if they were still starving for a happiness they hadn't yet tasted, they had no choice but to leave. Was the virus still mutating? I'd heard that even if they created a vaccine, it wouldn't be able to keep up with the mutation rate. Someone must still be working on it though. That's what humans do. We're loaded with strange feelings like duty and responsibility. There must be people fighting the good fight alone, determined to keep the world from going to waste. And on the other side, there were people turning this disaster into a festival of murder and madness. There's both responsibility and madness within me. I can't say the two are mutually exclusive.

I quickly felt dizzy and out of breath. We rested often and did not rush.

More old villages piled up as we neared the city.

Snow poured down again.

## *Gunji*

If I'd known that things would turn out like this, I would've escaped with Dori.  
No, no. Then I wouldn't have been able to say bye to Jina.  
And I can't let Jina down.

My feelings weren't hurt or anything. I have complicated feelings about her dad, but all the other adults were practically popping out their neck veins yelling to kick me out. What else could he have done? Plus, his younger brother had just been killed ... What was important to me was whether he'd also taken part. Did Jina's dad draw a number and wait his turn to rape Dori, too? Or did he pretend not to notice, knowing full well what the other guys were up to? He couldn't possibly have not known anything. The front door was too visible from the driver's seat for him to say otherwise. I respected Jina's dad like I respected her mom. If I were to say I respected her as much as King Sejong the Great, then I respected him as much as Lee Seung-yuop, king slugger of the Samsung Lions. When he hit Dori, I was surprised but not to the point of betrayal. Well, I did make a mental note that he, too, raises his hand when he's angry. And on second thought, there's no one I should avoid more than someone who raises his hand in anger. Everything I knew to be true was shattering. Had I gotten in his way while he was beating Dori, would he have beat me too?

I don't know.

Jina had snuck me some food. She was crying so hard I worried she'd faint. It didn't feel like we were saying goodbye for good. There's no way I was never going to see her again.

When Mom died, I was chock-full of rage and sadness. It felt like I was dying. I split from the world then. I'd seriously resented and abandoned the world I lived in. When Father died ... I'd always wished him dead, but I felt something I couldn't understand when he actually died. I felt bad, for him. And because I couldn't forgive myself for how easily I slipped into that feeling, I trapped myself in Jina's shed and punished myself. But when I saw Jina about to ride away on that truck, I found something. Something like a core that remained intact no matter how much I hated and hurt myself. I saw a different world than the one that my

parents showed me. The world that Jina showed me, the one she made for me. Thanks to her, I could avoid becoming exactly like my parents. I thought I'd drop dead the moment she left. Which I was at peace with. You know, gulping down the rest of my life like poison. But Jina pulled me out. Shrieking, she saved me from death's grip. So how could I love anyone else? I mean, how could I live in a world without Kwon Jina? We are bound to meet again. Given all the years I spent in silence, getting beaten up without really ever acting out, I think God could spare me that bit of luck. Don't you agree, God?

According to the map that Jina's dad studied every day, there are many different routes to Africa. I could go through Kazakhstan and the Middle East, or through Europe. I miss my phone. If I could just check Google Maps, I'd know my current location, the quickest route, and the current state of the world ... No, I wouldn't. There's no way the internet worked anymore, you idiot. When I was little, I saw a book at the library with a title like *Travel the World on Foot*. I should've read through it at least once. Back then, I had zero interest in travel or the world. Those sorts of things were just words. Plus, I was totally obsessed with the *Absolute Reign* martial arts novels by Jang Yeong-hoon. The world of the protagonist, Jeogigeon, who vanquished one evil after another and decided which adults were good, had been my reality. Anyway, though I didn't read the travel book, I can make it on foot as long as the title wasn't completely bogus. I can travel the world. Though I can't walk across the Pacific Ocean, of course.

I walked with my back to the sun. It crept up before abruptly cutting in front of me. Winter winds wrapped around my body, freezing me whole. In Korea, I'd been alone even while surrounded by people. I had to read every room I walked into and watch for every reaction. I didn't have to do that anymore. I just had to be true to myself. As I walked alone, I started thinking about more and more things. I wanted to prepare for the future, but I was stuck mulling over the past. That happened, oh right, and there was that person, I'd totally forgotten about that. You were such an idiot back then. Let's be brave now, let's be just. Who's going to recognize my bravery and justice now that I'm out here alone? Let's practice being brave and just anyway. Let's become a slightly better person at least. The day I see Kwon Jina again, I'll have become a good adult. No, don't use your brain, don't think, you're wasting your energy, you have to survive first, don't think, let's save our energy ... I repeatedly listed and crossed out these resolutions as I put one foot in front of the other.

I remember an uncle on my mom's side who was more than ten years younger than her. I barely have any memories of him. He was usually backpacking abroad. Wherever he found a place he liked, he'd stay and do whatever to make ends meet. He worked as a kitchen assistant, a janitor, a manual laborer, a mover, or

sometimes temped as a tour guide. When he took those types of jobs in Korea, he was invariably looked down on, and he got really angry at those who treated him poorly, but he said he didn't feel that way abroad. If people ignored him, he ignored them back. Even when things got hard, he didn't get depressed and could preserve the confidence inside him. His youth, savored abroad, felt like a burden in Korea. I'd heard all of this at Grandmother's funeral. She'd been ill for a long time and on her deathbed for almost a year; she died not long after my uncle came back. Mom had cried hugging her younger brother for quite a while. All the adults had badgered him at the funeral. *How much longer are you going to loaf around? You need to settle down soon and start making money so you can get married.* Where was he now? Surely the virus has affected wherever he was, too. If we were to meet again somewhere in this world, would we be able to recognize each other? Wouldn't we run away or draw our guns, unable to recognize each other ... I feel so sad. Everyone has died: people who found nice jobs in their twenties and worked hard to make money and planned for their futures, people like my uncle who threw themselves into whatever they wanted to do most in that moment without worrying about money or marriage, people like Dad who tortured themselves by torturing others, people like Mom who actually pitied people like Dad and suffered from depression all their lives ... They're all dead. Why am I still alive? No. I don't want to assign a reason for why I am still alive. Then there'd be a reason why Mom died, which I can't accept. If the bunkers were real, and they were occupied by people living honorably during this disaster, then what kind of people were they? If they were to repopulate Earth, would they create a different world?

Needless to say, I don't want to go anywhere that resembles a bunker.

I don't want to survive among people in a place like that.

I'm going to survive very quietly. I'll protect good things until I die. Good things are precious things. Which stay intact at my core.

This is what I set out to do.

Roads existed to connect village after village. The occasional car passed by. Sometimes I'd hear faint gunshots. Black smoke rose from a faraway field. I paused for a bit, wondering if I'd meet people there. Was it right to go where the people were? I had to think and decide for myself. That was what it meant to be alone. I walked back in the direction I'd come from. Darkness began to set in. I hurried my steps to find somewhere to stay for the night. I saw a village not too far off, with small houses crowded together. Suddenly a chill and fear set in. I had to spend the night alone. I wasn't sure about my safety, with or without villagers

around. I didn't have a gun or knife on me, and I'd never really fought anyone before. I didn't even know how to make a proper fist. When I reached the village entrance, I rushed into the first place I saw with four walls and a roof. I briefly held my breath and listened carefully. My heart was beating too loudly. I scanned the whole place with a flashlight. Broken, fallen furniture. Shattered windows, sunken floor. I set a display cabinet upright and used it to blockade the door, then sat on a ripped sofa for a while. Listening to the fierce winds, I waited for my fear and anxiety to calm. I tried to remember what Dori and Jina had done when we were together. I went outside to gather some dry branches and searched the house for some paper to use as kindling. I brought over a large basin from the bathroom and made a small fire inside it. I watched the flame spew soot. I caught myself muttering, You have to get used to this. Alarmed by my voice, I shut my mouth. My eyes kept closing, but I was too scared to fall asleep. I laid out my sleeping bag on the sofa and wrapped myself in a blanket. Every single one of the promises I'd made during the day suddenly felt absurd.

I opened my eyes.

It was bright all around.

For a moment I couldn't tell what was going on. I carefully recalled what had happened yesterday. And I mulled over everything that had come before that. My mind gradually cleared. The display cabinet I'd used to blockade the door stood just as I'd left it. My backpack was next to me. Nothing had happened overnight. I didn't die, I wasn't robbed—I slept, and it was now morning. It felt like I'd pulled off something big, maybe the most important challenge of my life.

—Good morning!

I uttered the daily greeting I'd shared with Jina into the air. A sense of pride washed over me until my heart stiffened. Calmly looking out the window, I started another fire to heat up a can of corn and ate its contents. I took out everything in my backpack; I had to know exactly how much I had of what. I scoured the house but didn't find a single thing to eat. Instead, I found a small box of matches and a rusted pocket knife in the desk drawer. The knife was as short as my index finger, but it was better than nothing. I also took a pen and a small notepad with Russian characters written on the first few pages, followed by many more blank pages. I wanted to leave a record. Because I was alone, because no one would ever know or remember me as I was in that moment, I wanted to at least keep a simple record of what I saw and ate, what happened as I walked. If only for someone to discover my record if I died. If only to have someone to remember my handwriting.

I put on my backpack and headed out. I had a splitting headache and my skin felt like it was going to crack, but the cold air was refreshing. I wandered around the village, looking through each house. Some houses were burned down, but six or seven were still relatively intact. I found traces of someone having stayed in one of them the previous night. Or on another night. The point is, someone had passed through pretty recently. Were they alone? Did they have company? Were they still okay? Would we end up going in the same direction?

Maybe it was because the sun was out, but I wasn't overly scared like I'd been at night.

I was going to wake up safe and sound and say good morning to Jina every day. I was going to collect my precious days and walk all the way to a warm ocean ... I felt like I'd just cracked open a forty-five-volume martial arts novel after years of putting it off.

Real life started now.

## *Jina*

The sun rose as we entered the city.

So many buildings destroyed. Trucks and freight cars huddled in packs. Red flags fluttering with text I couldn't understand. People moving in line with their hands on their heads as armed men kept watch. More trucks loaded with people like chicken headed to a slaughterhouse. We were let out in front of a large circular building surrounded by a church, stores, and a low-rise apartment complex. The armed men divided us into men and women. They didn't yell or beat us into submission; with a shot to the head they promptly executed whoever didn't follow orders or showed the slightest bit of hesitation. They herded the women into a large building. The ceiling was high and there were no windows. It might've been used for a supermarket. Several men came in, did a cursory health check on us, and asked our country of origin and age in English and Russian. They stood to attention when a man wearing clean clothes and a healthy glow walked in the door. As he spoke, the armed man standing next to him interpreted his words into English.

—We saved you from death's grip ... You can now participate in combat. It is an honorable battle. A sense of responsibility and duty is essential. You will be rewarded based on your achievements. Traitors will pay an irreversible price ... You are capable of building a city and an encampment. A new world will be created on this land. Dedicate your labor to those fighting on the frontlines. They will protect your lives.

That was the extent of what I understood from his lengthy speech. He told those who wished to participate in combat to step forward. A woman raised her hand to say something. A gun went off. The woman was dead. We put our hands on our heads and walked outside single-file. There was another gunshot, just as sudden as the last. I looked back. A woman at the end of the line had fallen. I had no idea why they killed her. Before long we reached a demolished building. There were already women carting wheelbarrows, cleaning up wreckage, collecting rebar. I was assigned a wheelbarrow. Monitored by armed men, we couldn't chat or rest. One of the men fired his gun in the air when the day grew dark. We

returned to the large building teeming with women. So many I couldn't count. They probably couldn't have abducted that many just from the road. Had the virus died down? Otherwise, why would they keep this many people in one place?

A large cart was drawn into the building. It was filled with canned food, bread, and beverages. Enough to eliminate the need for us to fight each other. I couldn't believe there was this much food left over. I thought they wouldn't feed us, that they'd just work us until we starved to death and dispose of our bodies. I had no idea who controlled this city and what their goals were, but if they were giving us food, then there must be people eating and drinking much better elsewhere. These canned foods and dry bread must be what they consider trifling and something they wouldn't even touch, no? I realized why all the villages and cities we'd passed through had been in ruins. Some group had pillaged them. They'd taken everything: food, people. Everyone else on the road had held each other at gunpoint over the scraps this group had left behind.

Having fallen asleep against the wall, I woke up to a chilling sensation. A man was pointing a gun at me. I got up reflexively. With his gun, he signaled me to follow him. Other women were also being forced out. The moment the man and I entered a dilapidated apartment nearby, he took off his pants. I heard screams from every direction. Two more men entered the apartment overnight. We returned to the large building after sunrise. An incredible amount of food was carted in again. I vomited mid-bite. But I still finished eating. We lined up and went to work. We finished working, came back, and drove off sleep as we ate. Night and day tick-tocked away.

Were they brainwashed?

I looked at the people pulling the trigger, unfazed like they were wielding a fly swatter.

Could they be choosing to do this if they were perfectly sane?

I thought back to my father and uncles shooting bandits. Father fired his gun even when the bandits were unarmed. I'd closed my eyes and turned away every time. Blocked my ears. I didn't hate Father; I only feared him. I might've died if it hadn't been for him. That's why I couldn't speak up and say, Do you have to shoot the unarmed, too? Where was Father? Was he alive? My aunt stopped speaking. We shared the same space but grew further apart. She didn't recognize me.

We rummaged through the wreckage to collect rebar and transport rocks, scooped sand from hills and rivers to carry in sacks, stacked rocks to build trenches, and applied cement. Alternating between these tasks, I was gradually forgetting how to think. Memories disappeared; emotions dulled. Past events felt like dreams—not that the present felt real either. People didn't seem like people,

and I didn't feel like a person either. So I had to reminisce. Whenever I could think to, I had to remind myself. My name on Dori's lips. Her voice. Her plump earlobes. Joy's eyes. Gunji's dream. All that I desperately wished were still alive. Remembering them, I'd promise myself,

Under no circumstances will I die here.

I will not die here at the very least.

I shouldn't forget these sentences, even if they are completely meaningless. I should remember them like my own name.

One night, someone pointed a gun at my forehead after I'd passed out from exhaustion. I opened my eyes. It was Father.

—This was the only way we could meet.

Father spoke as soon as we stepped inside the dilapidated apartment.

—I knew you'd stay alive. Of course, you're my daughter.

He looked well. Healthy complexion, a clean haircut and shave. He was wearing a padded coat. The kind of clothing worn by those who dragged me into this apartment every night.

—I told you. It's war.

There was a war going on between armed groups. Russia alone was overtaken by a dozen groups, while Europe and the Middle East had already closed their borders. All the groups used large cities as bases, and the conflict was becoming increasingly violent. When the strongest group takes over Russia, that would become the new Russia. New Russia would swallow Mongolia and even Kazakhstan. We had to subdue the other groups with nukes. We couldn't do it alone, but it was possible with alliances. Father was clearly excited to lay out this information. He wasn't my dad, the man who watched me with vacant eyes as we parted.

—We?

—Yes. Everyone fighting here.

—Who's fighting who?

—I've already explained all of this to you. Just wait it out a little longer, even if it's hard. We can start a new life here.

—We who work like slaves every day and get raped every night? Auntie doesn't even recognize me. We say one wrong thing and get our head blown off here.

—But you don't starve here, right? You can live as long as you follow their orders. Good days will definitely come if you wait. We could be the rulers of a new nation.

—Dad.

—I was on the southern frontline. I protected the border. You have no idea how many people I killed.

Father looked down at his hands.

— ... That's how much I've contributed. This is how we'll survive. It's far better than starving to death on the streets. You have no idea how intense the battle is. You'll die like a dog the minute you leave this place.

—Dad, I'm already a dog here. A dog.

—You just have to change your perspective. Don't think of yourself as a victim. We're all fighting on the same side.

—So you're fine with this?

—I see how the world works. There's a rumor that Korea's already been invaded by Chinese gangs.

—Is there nothing more to the world than what *you've* seen?

—There's no news that goes unheard around here. I can't live wandering the roads again. Having people on your side and being able to rely on them is good. Everyone here is on the same side.

—Dad, you have to pretend to rape me every time you meet with me. Are you saying you're fine with this?

—We have to get used to it. Brace ourselves. Once I rise in the ranks, I can get you out of here. You'll live like a princess. Even *we'll* get a house of our own. I'm doing all kinds of terrible things for you. I'll be recognized for my efforts.

—While others remain trapped.

—You'll get out soon. It won't take long. Just trust me.

—Dad, I'm going to die before then.

—Don't say that. Have some faith in your dad. It'll all work out. You have no idea what it's like out there.

—I can't stand this.

—Jina.

Father held my face. His hands were shaking. He was struggling to subdue his anger.

—Don't look at me like that. I'm not the bad guy.

—I know. You love me, Dad. You don't need to convince me.

—There's no other way. Here, if you don't pick up a gun, you have to do manual labor. Then you lose out. I'll be recognized for my contributions, and I

*will* keep you safe.

—I don't want anything from you. You're struggling to survive, just like me. So don't tell me that it'll get better, that everyone here is on the same side. Where's the hope in that?

—Jina.

—Don't act like you're doing something good. Don't call this an opportunity. Don't say you're doing your best. Please.

Father was dreaming a new dream. This dream was so intense and so enormous that it crushed my dad, the man who used to call after me if I was out of his sight for even a moment. This new man, who told me to just wait it out a little longer because I haven't starved or died, had defeated my old dad. And so his war had begun.

## *Ryu*

Dan and I had a long conversation about whether to abandon the car. He was hesitant to leave it behind. Failing to convince him, I agreed to stay in the city for now. We unpacked on the second floor of a ten-story concrete building. With desks and cabinets toppled here and there, it looked to be an old office space. We stacked the furniture into a fort and flipped over a large bookcase to use as a bed. The next day, Dan dragged in an old mattress from another floor. Over two days of scouring all ten floors, we found a bag of flour, dried apples, and hot chocolate mix. The moment I found marshmallows, jellies, and biscuits inside a metal desk drawer on the fifth floor, I blurted out, Thank you. I had always kept chocolate inside my desk at the travel agency. On days with back-to-back consultation calls, my hands would shake and my anemia acted up. I'd eat two chocolates and drink a lot of instant coffee. There was no pick-me-up like it. Did someone still in Seoul rummage through my desk and marvel at the chocolates inside? Did they give a prayer of thanks to God? Haemin, trying a marshmallow, smiled the brightest he had in a while.

The building, with its horrendous windows, looked like a demon covered in gaping holes. Silence changed its shape by night, and it trapped me in my fearful thoughts. I hugged Haemin every night. I hugged myself by way of hugging him. Despite the solace of having Dan and Haemin by my side, it also felt like being in a very distant universe. A distant universe where we shared concerns and body heat by virtue of physical proximity but nothing more. A universe where we could embrace only our own fears and pain.

—Mom.

Haemin, who'd been sucking on a jelly, placed something in my palm. Though I recognized the object, I looked at it for a long time, wondering if it was really what I knew it to be. I examined his teeth. There was an empty space next to his incisor. I touched his gum with my finger. I could feel his permanent tooth growing in.

—When did it start wobbling?

Haemin shook his head.

—I dunno.

—It wobbled before it fell out, right?

—I dunno.

—Didn't it hurt?

—Dunno. It just fell out.

I peered at his baby tooth. Even under these circumstances, Haemin was diligently growing. His bones and muscles were developing; he was getting taller. He had so many days ahead of him. I clutched the tooth. I knew to be careful not to lose it but couldn't help worry about losing such a tiny thing.

While Haemin slept, I showed Dan the baby tooth. He asked,

—Should we go back to Korea?

—That's where we came from. Did you forget? All those crazy bastards gunning for children's livers.

—It might've changed by now. Let's go back and see, restart there. We know Korea. We can figure out what's what.

What was he trying to restart? Haemin was growing, even dreaming, before our eyes.

— ... By the time we get back to Korea, spring will've arrived here.

—Spring will arrive in Korea, too.

—The way back might be more dangerous. We don't even have a car anymore. We have to walk everywhere.

—We still have to go somewhere.

—We didn't abandon everything and come all the way here just to go back.

—Then where do you suggest we go?

—I'm saying we can't go back to Korea. There's nothing there now, dear.

—You're always like this. You contradict everything I say. Suddenly Dan lashed out.

—You don't trust me. You deny me. That's what you do.

I didn't reply. I didn't want to fight. Unable to fall asleep, we tossed and turned awhile. Was there nowhere in this vast land for us three to hide? Dan got up and wandered in the dark for some time before calling me to a corner. I walked over to him. He laid me on the floor and pulled down my pants. I said I didn't want to; he tried to force it in anyway. Our sex life in Korea had consisted of Dan walking from the living room where he was watching TV and into our bedroom, removing my pants and penetrating me and ejaculating after a couple of minutes, pulling his pants back up, and returning to the living room where he watched more TV. This

used to happen almost every other month. No conversation before or after sex. No kissing or foreplay. It'd felt like an obligation, like scratching an itch for him. It started to hurt, so I shoved him away.

—I'm your husband. Not an animal. Your husband.

Whether he was angry or pleading, I couldn't tell.

—I'm going to go crazy if I don't at least have this. There's nothing we can do here, honey. Nothing we can do.

What he sought was familiarity. The one familiar thing in this place where everything is strange and frightening and uncertain. Dan tried to put it in again, and I evaded him. After peering down at me, he muttered,

—What do we do now. Honey, where do we go? Where can we go?

Teardrops. Dan was crying. What kind of person had he loved? Did he ever tell *her* that he loved her? Had he truly loved her? Did he still love her? Did we actually know anything about love? My curiosity was devoid of exhaustion, shame, rage, jealousy. I simply wanted to ask him. If he really knew what love is. If he's ever felt love toward someone separate from himself, not like our love for Haerim and Haemin.

I stood and pulled up my pants. Sniffling, Dan also put his pants back on.

—What kind of person was she?

He wiped his tears and stared at me.

—The woman you used to see about five years ago.

His face stiffened.

—I was going to ask one of these days. How you met, if it'd been serious, why you didn't break up with me then, that sort of thing.

—Have you known and kept quiet all along?

I nodded. After a spell of silence, he said,

—There's not much to say.

—But tell me. We can talk about this.

—How could I tell you of all people? I might be a real son of a bitch, but . . .

—It doesn't bother me.

— . . .

—You know this.

—I don't. I don't know. How does this not bother you?

—Because I don't love you.

His face crumpled.

—You don't love me either.

—Why do you say that?

—Hon, we’re connected by so many things besides *love*. We’ve endured hard times and come this far together. If that’s love, then it’s love, but it doesn’t have to be, you know?

—...

—...

—Still. Don’t say that.

—It’ll be better than not knowing.

—I don’t understand you.

— ... I want to know.

—You should’ve asked me back then.

—Back then, I didn’t want to know.

—Why?

—I couldn’t afford to.

—So *now* you can?

I chuckled.

—Yeah. All we have is time.

If we were still in Korea, I wouldn’t have been able to ask him. I might have put it off time and time again—for after we’d gotten old, after the kids had grown up and made their own homes—until the day I would’ve realized that the window of opportunity had long passed. No, I might have lashed out at some point before then, surprising myself as well as him. I might have yelled, How shameless do you have to be to go out with some woman while I’ve had to live like this? Back then, we had so much to take care of together: our children’s education, our savings, our mortage, our family drama, the backbiting and meddling and prejudice of people around us ... Now, no such things. We only had each other left. We were all we had to focus on. We had to say and hear things we couldn’t say or hear before. Once I admitted I didn’t love him, I realized that those words actually held no meaning. I was relieved by our newfound simplicity. We were Haemin’s Mom and Dad to each other. That was enough.

## *Dori*

In the city, we moved only by night. We crouched around its darkest corners. The buildings were dark, the streets dirty. So much sewage, so many corpses with missing eyeballs or exposed intestines. Humans hunted dogs and cats for food; dogs and cats preyed on human corpses. There will come a day when humans eat humans. Someone's probably at it already. Spring needed to come quickly. Rivers and fields needed to thaw. Humans may try to push one another into the pit of hell, but nature can slow the process.

Sometimes I heard the hoarse voice of someone wailing or the lament of someone gone mad. People wandered the streets like ghosts. I wanted to find a map and a dictionary and get out of the city as soon as possible. We got lost inside a deserted building and found an already looted supermarket. We painstakingly combed through it. Joy found a box of cereal and a box of biscuits that'd fallen behind the display shelf. Overjoyed, we cheered silently. We also found a bunch of broken candles. But no shoes.

Many buildings had been torched. They actually seemed safer than intact buildings. To get out of the wind, we entered a building blackened with soot. We saw firelight not far in. I heard people, too. I grabbed Joy's hand, snuck back out, and sprinted without looking back. They could've been nice people. We could've helped each other. Or not—that was more likely.

After trudging awhile, we found ourselves before a highrise building. It looked at least thirty stories tall. Joy grabbed my hand. Too big and scary, she said. We found a small building in an alley, in a row of similarly sized buildings. I asked Joy if this was okay. She nodded. We hid in the building farthest down the alley. I briefly considered starting a fire but gave up that idea. We ate cold canned food and waited for daybreak. I fell asleep sitting upright, watching the space slowly fill with light.

At last, we found a bookstore. It was relatively unscathed, but we still couldn't find a dictionary. Neither a Russian-Korean nor a Russian-English dictionary. Not even a Russian-Japanese one. I couldn't recognize the other languages. We didn't find a map, either. Joy picked out a picture book. It was a small, thin book with

illustrations and no text. Near the entrance, there was a magazine section with stiff copies scattered about. My eyes gravitated to a photo of a woman with red hair wearing a black cape coat. Only then did I grow curious. Why was Jina's hair red? I felt the familiar ache that faintly spread throughout my body every time I saw Jina. Her beauty had felt otherworldly from the moment I saw her, but she'd talked to *me*. She'd held my hand first. That sensation will linger, torturing me for the rest of my life. It will make me miss her. It will make me pitiful, the rest of my life dull.

Joy liked the bookstore. We hid there for a day.

We scoured the city for several more days but didn't find a map or a dictionary. I didn't feel that sad or desperate. It occurred to me that I could make a wrong decision even if I did have a map I could read. What would change by knowing where I was and what would appear whichever way I went? Would I come up with a destination? Wouldn't it be more confusing? Wouldn't I worry and hesitate? If the place I wanted to go, the place I wanted to avoid, and the easy path were all set, then I'd probably end up doing whatever everyone else was. If I knew about a walkable path, then I'd only chase after that. My mind was limited to basic information. West was Europe, south was Kazakhstan, south of that was the Middle East, crossing the Red Sea would lead to Africa. That was it. It seemed like enough information, and I actually didn't want to know more. I wanted to stay and put things off. I wanted to quietly hide somewhere and hibernate like a squirrel.

—Let's go find a library.

I readily accepted Joy's suggestion,

—Yeah. Let's.

—Is it too hard to walk? Are you in pain?

—I'm feeling low energy, but it's fine. I can walk.

I flashed a slow smile. Darkness descended on her face. Joy replied,

—Let's take it easy today and look for a library tomorrow. You need to sleep.

Joy's hand gripped mine tight. I followed wherever she took me. Just past an old cathedral tucked between low-rise buildings, we hid in a small house buried in shade. I couldn't bear the chill penetrating my body, so I made a fire. I felt the cold even more intensely as my body relaxed. The frozen pain thawed and coursed through my entire body like blood. Every breath burned. Like there was shattered glass in my lungs and heart. My hands and feet and lips trembled so much that I couldn't even take a proper sip of water.

I slept without a single dream.

When I opened my eyes, Joy was massaging my hand.

—How long did I sleep?

She was crying. I extended my hand to wipe her tears. Joy's face felt so warm and my hand so much colder that I wondered if I'd maybe died. Was I touching Joy, having died without realizing it? I wasn't scared by these thoughts entering my mind. I was just relieved to see Joy safe and sound.

—Why are you crying, Joy? Did I sleep for too long?

I asked again. If Joy replies, then I must still be alive. Wiping her tears, she held out two fingers.

—Two hours?

She shook her head furiously, her shoulders shuddering. —Two days. Two days without opening your eyes.

Joy must've placed her hand on my heart hundreds of times. I have to get up. I have to show her that her big sister's doing just fine, that her heart is still beating. I pushed myself off the floor and straightened my back. The picture book from the bookstore lay open on the floor. Its blank pages were now filled with Joy's handwriting.

*I don't leave my big sister on her own.*

*My big sister doesn't leave me on my own.*

*When she wakes up, I'll make a promise.*

*I'll promise to love her.*

Joy will remember me. She's strong, and she'll keep growing. She'll become a respectable adult. I'll grow younger and younger in her memory. One day she'll realize, I'd thought Dori was an adult back then, but she was barely in her early twenties. She'd been young, too. We need to live through each and every day in order for such a day to come. We can't skip over time.

We slipped out of the small house around sunset. Because my body hadn't recovered, I struggled to walk for long periods of time. It'd take quite a while to leave this city. I was definitely ill, and although I wouldn't die right away, I was growing weaker. One day I'd become a burden to Joy. Where did I have to go to meet Jina? We parted without making a single promise. I'll wait for you, let's meet again, I'll come back ... We didn't even get to say goodbye. Did we meet on this cold land just to become passersby? Was that why we'd shared ourselves with each other and fallen in love at first sight? Should I have not run away like that? Joy stopped in her steps and dragged me into a building. I followed helplessly. Joy signed,

—There's a person over there. Just standing there, watching us.

We peeked outside. The sun had set, but it wasn't completely dark yet. A blue dawn-like light still remained. Someone was at the building entrance across the street, at our ten o'clock, looking at the place we were just at. I took out the gun. I'd never once shot a gun. I didn't want to shoot one in the future either. I didn't want to kill any more people.

The wind blew, scattering trash. It was silent and dark. The person didn't even try to hide herself and just blankly stared at the ground where we had stood. As if gazing into an untouchable past. A small child popped out of the building and clung onto her arm. Only then did I recognize her. I held Joy's hand and headed out to the street. I heard the faint sound of someone crying from afar. No, was it the wind? The notes were sustained plaintively like a clear, high-pitched aria.

—Do you remember them?

I added,

—They gave us candy.

Only then did Joy nod her head. The woman's husband also walked out. The woman slowly waved at us. Our first time receiving a greeting like that on Russian soil. With the road between us, we watched each other pass by.

We could meet like this.

We can meet like this.

If she's alive. As long as she's alive.

A river appeared after we trudged awhile. We'd followed one to the city, and here we were before a river again. Back to the starting line, I thought. It was so dark that we couldn't see the other side. I signed to Joy,

—Let's decide in the morning whether to cross.

We entered another low-rise building and made a small fire. Joy fell asleep in no time. I didn't want to think about anything. I was tired. Yet my thoughts kept rushing towards death. No matter how hard I tried, I still only thought about death. I sang to block out the thoughts. I sang as softly as I breathed, then closed my mouth. I heard something in the distance. I strained my ears. I couldn't tell what it was. It sounded somewhat like thunder and trains and the earth splitting. It was a very heavy sound. I stared at Joy sleeping as I focused on the sound. Was I losing my mind? I looked out the window but found only darkness. I stopped myself from killing the fire and waking Joy. It may be more dangerous to go outside right now. I have to go find the woman in the morning. I have to ask her if she heard the same sound. I have to check, through her, whether I've lost my mind. In case something bad happens to me, I have to ask her to look after Joy. I

have to hold onto these passing acquaintances. Staring down the darkness with a revolver in my hand, I waited for the day to break.

## *Jina*

They kept carting people over. They killed them as easily as they brought them. A trench was built around the city. Father told me he was going to the border and never showed up again. Some nights I wasn't dragged to the apartment. I couldn't say I was lucky. What luck? On my way back to the large building after work, I was ordered to get on a truck. People were boarded onto dozens of trucks and driven a few hours northeast. Passing mountains, a river, and fields, we occasionally spotted villages comprised of small wooden houses and vegetable gardens. The trucks reached the entrance of a city well into the night. On a field blanketed with pure white snow stood a concrete building, and a row of tall leafless trees separated the building from the road. Armed men herded everyone from the trucks into a red cathedral. We were going to build an encampment here, they said. Trucks and tanks loaded with equipment arrived overnight.

Work began as soon as the sun came up. We collected all the corpses lying around the streets and buildings, and burned them with the trash. Our work was concentrated on the eastern outskirts of the city and around a large river to the west. We carried dirt, stones, and trees from a low forest and dug trenches. We filled sunken asphalt and repaired the city. The electricity was promptly restored. There were fewer soldiers compared to the last city we were in, which meant the surveillance wasn't as meticulous. In the evening, strangers entered the cathedral. They'd been captured from the road earlier that day. There was a Korean person among them. She had a child with her. She said her husband had been taken somewhere, but she didn't know where. I told her what I'd been through. The woman told me what she'd heard from a pack of people she'd met on the road: their warnings and laments, their songs. Being able to talk with her, that alone gave me a lot of strength. The child cried for his dad. I was scared that the soldiers might kill the crying child.

—Your dad is here somewhere. You'll see him again someday, but only if you don't cry. Let's wait a little. Let's try holding in our tears just until we've slowly, silently counted to a hundred.

Dori had taught me that strategy. To wait just until I'd slowly, silently counted to a hundred.

Starting the next day, I never left the woman's side. She never expressed her pain or confusion. She worked in silence and ate what she was given. I have to find my husband, she'd said in a resolute voice. And so she had to survive this now. On the fifth night, the woman mentioned a pair of sisters. She'd initially met them near Baykal and saw them again in this very city not too long ago. She never thought she'd see them again on this vast land, but they'd walked towards her at sunset, like an illusion. The way they walked hand in hand was just magical, as pure and poignant as a fairytale that ends with a happily ever after. Simply watching them from afar had consoled her. They could've been captured and brought here, too, but since she hadn't seen them around, it must've meant that they managed to escape to safety...

The cathedral doors opened, cutting the woman off mid-sentence. New captives walked in.

Among them was Dori.

*Dori*

Among them was Jina.

## *Ryu*

The two of them must have been silently counting to a hundred. They must have recognized each other even from afar and counted to a hundred. Even after they counted to a hundred to check that each other wasn't a mirage that would evaporate, they continued to gaze just in case. Perhaps they did not step towards each other in case it would break the spell.

As if someone had pressed play, the two drew near and met as one, touching and kissing as if they could lick each other's wounds away. Next to them were dozens of emaciated people sprawled on the floor, leaning their burdensome bodies against the wall, crouched like crumpled pieces of paper. They all stared high above where a medieval portrait of a saint hung high beside three crosses, an execution device that had become the symbol of salvation. Here, where everyone individually sank into their own pain and misery—even the saint, Jesus, and the two crucified thieves—these two young women were the only ones facing and embracing each other. Why are you here? How come you're here? The two of them murmured, their faces held close. You should've gone farther away. You should've gone somewhere faraway. When one spoke, the other spoke. The words came out of different bodies, but they were the same words.

Someone cursed and spat at them.

I didn't understand what was said, but their disgust was conveyed.

Just then, a low cry resounded from a corner of the cathedral. People tossed in their sleep. A gust of wind tolled the bell. In the dark, I found myself muttering. I repeated the same sentence as if reciting a prayer.

I wouldn't have lasted if it had been just me and Haemin left.

I felt protected by the gaze between Dori and Jina, by Joy's pure expression. With them, the air changed. It became possible not to be desensitized to murder, violence, humiliation, and resignation. I remembered that, even amidst all the bad in the world, another world was possible. I could tell Haemin nice things. Jina rushed through her workload to help Dori, who'd grown weak since I last saw her. We kept an eye on the soldiers who might shoot Joy, becoming her mouth and

ears. Whenever Haemin threw a tantrum wanting his dad, Jina told him what his dad was doing right now and where, how much he missed Haemin and his mom, as if she'd seen the man herself. We sat around and ate. There were hands to hold onto.

Yet each of us bore our own pain and regret.

I had no way of knowing whether Dan was dead or alive. The possibility of his death immobilized me. I shouldn't have said that it doesn't have to be love. If I couldn't bring myself to say that I loved him, then I should've said, Your life matters the most to me. I should've said, I'm fine without you telling me that you love me. I need you. With just that, Dan would've understood. What I had failed to tell him. The truth I couldn't express in language. He would've recognized the unique pattern of the numerous yesterdays we've spent together. He would've cherished it in his heart, and perhaps that could've held him back from falling into danger.

It was dawn. From not too far away I heard a *boom*, then the earth shook. Before I could know whether I was dreaming or awake, another explosion went off. Everyone screamed and ran to the cathedral doors to pound and push. The doors were locked with a latch installed outside. The windows were also blocked with sheet metal. The loud bangs continued, and the earth continued to shake. We heard tanks and trucks drive past. We had to open the doors. We had to break them open. We had to know what was going on. But the cathedral only contained the saint's portrait, crosses, and us people. The crosses and portrait were hung out of our reach. We all came together to push on the doors. A machine gun dinned clamorously outside. Everyone backed away from the doors. Just as we were about to try again, the doors suddenly opened. Someone had removed the latch from outside. A man ran in.

—Liza!

He kept tearfully calling out to Liza. Several guards lay collapsed behind him. Even as tension hung in the air, the surrounding area looked more intact than I expected. The bomb probably hadn't been dropped right out front. A pillar of fire rose with a racket from the east. People scattered out of the cathedral in every direction at full speed.

—Sister, let's just get to that apartment first.

Jina grabbed Haemin's hand. Dori and Joy ran ahead. I didn't hear any gunshots. Jina named our next destination as we pressed our bodies against a wall. I heard bombs detonating one after another from the east. The horizon grew red; the earth shook. Jina looked around.

—Everyone must've gone to the trenches.

It was still dark. We had to run away as far as possible before sunrise. But I kept looking back, even as we darted between buildings. Jina said that we had to follow the river north, that a worse hell awaited down south. I slowed down. She looked back at me.

—You kids go first.

I couldn't hesitate. It wasn't something to hesitate over.

—I have to go find my husband.

—He's probably on the frontlines, Unni.

—He's not one to shoot a gun. He must be a laborer. He's somewhere here.

—Let's go somewhere safe first. We can think there.

—I have to find him now. Please. You go first.

—You don't even know where he is.

Dori chimed in,

—He might be in the gymnasium ... I'm not sure though. Jina looked at Dori in surprise.

—How do you know?

—The day we were taken. The men got off there first.

—Where is it? Think you can find it again?

Jina and Dori started running first. I feared I'd put these children in danger. The eastern clangor died down a bit. We used buildings as shields, then cut across a park sprouting scrawny trees. The air looked a little green. Haemin, who'd been half-running, half-dragged by the hand, came to a slow stop and looked up at the trembling sky.

—Haemin, come on.

I tugged at his hand.

—Mom.

Haemin pointed at the southern sky. I thought it was a bird. A large eagle. A black eagle that feasts on human organs.

—Plane.

He murmured as if sleeptalking.

—Dad told me that planes ...

Jina sprinted over and threw Haemin on her back.

Dori and Joy pulled me by each arm.

A large transport plane and several fighter planes flew over us from the south.

We ran past small houses. Dori pointed to a large building. We quieted our steps and hid behind a wall. Snow flurries blew in the wind. We inched toward the building. The door was open. Corpses were strewn everywhere. There were soldiers among them. After inspection, Dori said Dan wasn't here. Where did I have to go to find him? Where can I find you, dear? If he were alive, he would be looking for us, too.

—I have to go back.

I must. I must find him before we grow farther apart.

—No. Unni, it's dangerous.

—I won't see him ever again if I don't go now.

—What about Haemin? You can't go back there with him.

Jina touched my face with her dry, cracked hands. Only then did I realize I was crying. Tears flowed without a single sob. Jina was crying, too. My marriage was so predictable, it was precarious. That's why I hadn't given it enough thought. I hadn't properly dedicated myself to our love. If we grew apart like this, I'd regret it for the rest of my life. I didn't want to live like that.

Jina hugged me and murmured in my arms,

—Sister, you have to survive first. You have to survive in order to see him again.

Dori spoke slowly,

—She can't just wait around. She might not make it.

Jina did not let go of my hand as Dori went on.

—She knows, and she's still going. Because there's something more important than life or death.

Dori looked into my eyes. Her voice was the smallest and firmest among us. She was right. There was something more important.

—Please, sister, come with us.

—Coming with us doesn't guarantee survival, Jina. They have their own miracle.

Our own miracle. Was such a thing left? Maybe we each have a person. Someone to remember by their name, not in relation to something else. Some people join the road but pass by instantaneously. Others appear as naturally as the landscape we notice after having grown numb. To experience our miracle, we must go find it ourselves. We can't yearn for it while growing apart. Even if we were to be enslaved again, as long as I could be reunited with Dan and anticipate another escape ... I hugged Jina and patted her back. I promised to survive. My

other miracle—busy growing even in this moment and unable to peel his eyes off the eastern sky—took the first step.

—Please survive. Please.

Jina.

—I'll think of you every day.

Dori.

No one could promise to meet again.

The sun was hidden in the snow flurries, but the road was bright enough for them to distinguish the dangers from the good fortunes ahead. They raced between trees reaching for the sky and looked back only once. As they claimed their miracle and charged towards an elsewhere, Dori, Jina, and their small angel grew farther and farther away from me and Haemin.

## *Epilogue*

## *Joy*

I never told anyone, but I still remember. The dream I had the night I lost sound. I flew. The world I saw from the sky was tiny and beautiful. Everyone's head turned into yellow, white, black dots. I no longer saw people, houses, and trees; I saw mountains and rivers, fields and oceans. Myriad colors and brilliant lights. I shrank as my field of vision expanded. The world grew smaller and smaller, the sky bigger and bigger. Flying in the sky was like diving in the ocean. There's no sound high up in the sky or deep down in the ocean. Sounds dwindle away. After that night, my world was more like space than Earth. There's no sound in outer space. And it's perfect, even without sound. I dreamt that I flew high up in the sky and became an astronaut. That's why I lost sound.

I never told anyone, but I still remember the song. Last night in a dream, I put on my flying wings and soared above the clouds. *Daddy looks for me when I'm playing at Rainbow Park.* I sing it to myself every day. I'm sure I'll eventually forget it. Everything about the song will be wiped clean from my memory. In the meantime, I'll learn the song of light. Light is as infinite as sound. It's made new by all sorts of collaborations. Various pitches, depths, and breadths of light flaunt themselves and praise each other, creating beautiful melodies and rhythms. I watch this fantastic performance several times a day. I want to tell Dori, too, but it's impossible to explain. Like explaining sound to someone who can't hear.

I never told anyone, but I had a dream. I planned to become a poet. So I read the dictionary every day. I wanted to know lots and lots of words. As my vocabulary grew, my perspective expanded. Like I was looking down from the sky. I also planned to become a novelist. I've already picked out a name for the protagonist of the first novel I'll write: Wish. It's such a pretty word. The protagonist of my second novel will be named Hsiw. Wish has to exist in order for Hsiw to exist. I also planned to become a painter. I can perceive the performance of light, and drawing is just transcribing it into sheet music. I planned to become a choreographer, too. One who dances without music. I also wanted to become a

drummer. I wanted to play at least one musical instrument. I'm a dreamer. I wear myself out with all these dreams, and I can dream about anything because I am young. I believed that nobody could mess with my dreams and vice versa, but my dreams messed with my parents. Every one of them made them miserable. When I wrote a poem, they complimented me but muttered, If only she hadn't lost her hearing. When I drew something, they patted me on the back but muttered, If only we had more money. When I danced, they told me I looked pretty and gave me a hug that left me feeling sad. So I didn't want to do any of it—writing, painting, dancing. When it was just Dori and me left, I began to dream a new dream. The dream to become an adult. An adult who doesn't have to hide behind her older sister. I got scared whenever Dori hid me or covered my eyes. It was a lot scarier than keeping my eyes wide open and seeing everything. I wanted to tell her not to do all that, to please stop getting in my way. But if I didn't hide, if I saw everything, Dori fell apart. She floundered and didn't protect herself. I had to be invisible for Dori to fight her hardest. So I decided to change my perspective. Whenever Dori stepped in front of me, she and I were combining forces. We were stronger together, like Transformers. Eventually, I felt like we were combining forces just by holding hands. I wanted to become an adult already. Then I'd be able to fight my own fights without Dori. But first, I had to grow tall and know a lot of things. Like what love is.

Love ... I really have so much to say about love. Stupid adults think I don't know anything, but I can draw up a chart of everyone I spent time with and arrows to show who loved who. Poor Gunji. If he had loved me instead of Jina, then no one would be sad. Gunji treated me like a puppy and sometimes seemed to really think of me as one. He said whatever was on his mind as he would in front of a puppy, probably thinking I couldn't understand. But I can see beyond sound, as long as I can read people's lips and expressions. I can see that Gunji has a red gem embedded in his heart. It'll continue to give him strength like a battery that lasts forever. He'll walk to the end of the Earth with the gem's power. As someone who once dreamt of being an artist, I know that there's no conclusion to love. Even if you tie a nice little bow for the sake of an ending, a bow's just a bow. The story continues even after the bow. You can't get in the way of that. There's no bow to Gunji's love. There's no bow to mine either.

Each time Dori got hurt, I took a big step towards becoming an adult.  
I learned how to distinguish between important and not-so-important things.  
But ultimately, I didn't get to become an adult.

The night I lost sound, I dreamt of flying in the sky. I soared and soared without falling, then became an astronaut. Years before, I'd had a scary dream about falling and had woken up in tears. Dad had patted my back and said the dream was helping me grow taller. I should've had more of those falling dreams and become an adult ... But I just kept flying, too scared to fall. The night I took my last breath, I dreamt of flying across space. Which is the same as flying across time. I soared and soared across time and saw what lies beyond this place. Then I couldn't open my eyes.

There are so many memories and thoughts I never told anyone. I practiced trimming them into very short sentences so I wouldn't forget. Meandering stories grew shorter like life itself, until they became a single word embedded in my heart. There's a gem inside me, too, and it shines blue. Just as I recognized what was inside Gunji's heart, Dori must've noticed what was inside mine. My promise, my gem, will never ever change.

## *Gunji*

It looked like a tree, but I couldn't accept it as one.  
I didn't know its name for the longest time.  
Still I ate its fruit, leaned against its massive trunk, and carved my memories  
into its bark.

Then I just knew one day.  
*Baobab*, a word I often overheard from conversations I don't understand, refers  
to this tree.  
Now I call the baobab by its name.  
Some things, you just know one day.

I walked and ran for so long, I don't know how long. I faced countless dangers.  
I got swept up in a war I didn't understand. I hadn't even realized it was war. I  
killed people without knowing what was going on. Surviving without killing ...  
was that possible? Did anyone manage that? I don't know. The world had turned  
on its head, and no order remained.

Was there any honor left in life?  
Was murder still evil?  
I hid between corpses to escape death. I heard huge explosions from the  
direction I'd just come from. Between the heat and my migraines, I drew scars on  
my body to muffle one pain with another. I was captured and reduced to a hole. I  
ate any bug that came my way because I didn't have anything else to eat. One  
thought returned to me over and over.

I can't die like this. It can't end like this.  
Past sensations pounce on me like bandits whenever I startle awake in the  
silent pitch-black night. I sink into a putrid sense of shame and guilt and can't fall  
back asleep. I barely resist the urge to die.

People live here. A very small number. We live only as nature allows us. We  
avoid conflict and look after each other with sufficient indifference. We swim and  
fish every day. We eat fruit and scatter the seeds. Our lives are neither abundant

nor lacking. Humans didn't go extinct, but we can't say that day won't come. I don't know how vast the world is. I don't even know where I am. I don't know what's happening on the opposite end of this continent, or whether people are still killing each other.

There's a time delay between experience and epiphany. There was something I hadn't realized, even as I killed and escaped and hid and ran during the war, even as I walked and walked until my mind went completely blank. I just knew that I loved Jina. Nothing was more important. That's how I got here and grew used to staying in one place. I started each morning with a mantra: You don't have to think about death anymore. All you have to do is wait. I lived thousands of days like that, and then some.

It was a sunny summer day. I took a dugout canoe to a nearby beach and cast a net, then got swept up in a wave and flipped over. While pulling myself back on the canoe, I had a sudden realization.

Jina loved Dori.

I couldn't get back on. The canoe flipped again. I thought hard as I doggy-paddled with my head above water. I wasn't upset, only a little embarrassed. If Jina could see me now, she'd have a good belly laugh. The net floated away with the tides, but the canoe was calmly waiting for me nearby.

That doesn't change anything.

I watched the net drift farther away. What I was waiting for wasn't Jina's love, and she too was waiting for me for reasons beyond love. I got in the canoe, gazing at the distant horizon. I lay in a fetal position and bit my tongue before finally letting out a very small whisper.

—I miss you.

I still remember her so vividly. Jina's face. Jina's voice. Jina's laugh. Jina's red hair. I missed her so much that I burst into tears. I cried and cried until I ran out of breath and my heart ached. I'd held it in, this overwhelming feeling. In fear that it'd blow up in my face like this, I'd stopped myself from even thinking about how much I missed Jina. I was wailing and hitting myself in the head when I had a scary thought. I sat up. What if I suddenly realize that Jina's no longer on this planet? That no matter how much I wait, I can't ever see her again? What if I just know this one day? The net I thought had drifted far away was floating by the canoe. I rinsed my face in the ocean and looked at the shore. If I had to make one decision in life, I'd choose Kwon Jina every time. No matter how bad the situation, I could always keep going if I thought it'd lead me to Jina. I have a dream, and that dream hasn't been realized yet. I want to catch fish and pick

sweet, tangy berries and give them to someone I love. I'm going to keep living, earnestly praying for her to be alive. Please, it's all I ask.

*Us*

Dori.

Yeah?

Do you know how old the Earth is?

... I used to.

It's four and a half billion years old. The universe, fifteen billion. And they say humans have been around for about two billion.

I can't believe you remember all that.

I just made it up.

What!

Hey, you know I told you about having prophetic dreams.

You said that was a joke!

It's not, though. I just said it was a joke in case you couldn't handle it.

Uh-huh.

I actually dreamt that we met again. Even before I saw you at the cathedral.

I've had dreams like that.

...

... Does that mean I have prophetic dreams, too?

Anyway. I have this recurring dream, and it's about the end of humanity.

... How often do you have it?

About once a year. It's super vivid.

The end of humanity?

Yeah. Humans die out, and only animals and plants survive. But humans don't realize they're dead and live on as ghosts. Like in *The Sixth Sense*. You've seen it, right?

Yeah.

Everyone's a ghost like Dr. Malcolm, so there's no one to tell them, Hey, you're a ghost. And no one dies, since they're all ghosts. Another ice age comes, all the animals and plants die out, then everything thaws and different life forms emerge. The Earth creates and destroys and creates all sorts of things for billions

of years. Meanwhile, humans continue to exist as ghosts. Not realizing what they are, worrying about the environment and the future of humanity.

...

Scary, huh?

So, are humans going extinct?

I keep thinking about that, too. Can we really call it extinction if we stay ghosts forever?

No, I'm asking, are humans about to go extinct?

Hmm ... Even if it doesn't happen right away, eventually?

Well, that's one hell of a dream.

Yeah. I wake up exhausted. A bit drowsy and ... I get this weird feeling.

Weird feeling?

I start wondering if *I'm* a ghost. If I'm living without realizing that the world's already screwed.

... What do you mean, screwed?

I've come to the conclusion that we're not really screwed as long as we *know* we're screwed.

When are we really screwed, then?

When we don't even know it.

... Like ghosts?

Yeah. You can't get more screwed than ghosts.

I don't think I get it.

Don't you think we'll know when that moment comes? We'll feel that it's all over.

I used to always feel like death was right in front of me.

Is it still there?

I don't think about it anymore.

...

Maybe I'm a ghost.

You're human for sure. A human so cute and smart and pretty, I can't take my eyes off you.

You know, I saw Gunji not too long ago.

Gunji?

Yeah. An older Gunji. He's changed a lot, but I recognized him. In dreams, you just know.

An older Gunji ...

He was alone on a bright, warm beach. He was sending a bottle into the ocean.

He told you, too, huh?

What?

His dream.

Never heard it. What was Gunji's dream?

...

...

... Maybe she *does* have special dreams.

What?

Nothing. So Gunji sent the bottle off?

Yeah.

Why?

I don't know. I just remember him doing that. I woke up and instantly forgot everything else that happened.

...

Do you think we can all ... meet again?

... Someday, as long as we remember and wish.

...

...

Should we head out?

Yeah. Let's get up.

Jina.

Yeah?

I love you.

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